

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Flemming Hemmersam, ed. *To Work, To Life Or To Death: Studies In Working Class Lore*. Copenhagen: Society for Research in the History of Labor Movements in Denmark, 1996. 363 pp. DKK 280.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-87739-41-2.

Reviewed by Anette Vasstroem (Curator, The Workers Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark)
Published on H-Labor (May, 1997)

The study of folklore emerged in the end of that century which also witnessed the birth of nationalism. The nation needed the people as an excuse for creating the democracy of the bourgeoisie. "The people," at that time, undoubtedly meant artisans and the peasants, whereas the industrial workers were considered a mob that ought to be disciplined before they could be regarded as worthy of citizenship. Humanist studies arose to look at that part of the people which was considered the nation's backbone. Folklorists performed an important part of that task, collecting old tales, songs and traditions. The workers, however, remained invisible in the study of folklore for a long time. This book, however, claims the study of workers' lore as a field in its own right. The authors are all scientists who have between 10-15 years of experience in the study of working-class culture. This collection is the first attempt in the Scandinavian countries to specify a study for working-class folklore, and to convey these thoughts and results to an international audience.

The empirical studies are chosen from a wide range, but the authors share the same fundamental 'gaze' at working-class culture: an understanding of folklore as formulated in traditions, quotations, memoirs etc ..., as a counter position to the world of official concepts. They draw from theories formulated by Gramsci, Ginsburg and Redfield to establish the argument that, far from being *Gesunkenes Kulturgut*, workers' lore is something important in itself, formed in opposition to the ruling system—not a subdivision of the ruling (national) culture, but a true counter-culture.

Folklore research, into the the life and traditions of the working-class people is divided into two main fields: worker lore, concerned with the living and working conditions of workers; and labour and family lore, dealing with traditions, memoirs and relics within the labour

movement. This publication presents studies in both fields and from three Scandinavian countries. Flemming Hemmersam deals with labour lore in a study of materials and objects such as flags and banners from the Danish Labour Movement. Anne Eriksen from Norway and Ulla Maija Peltonen from Finland write about worker lore during the inter-war period. They base their analysis largely on autobiographical material.

Anne Eriksen's article, "The Light and Dark Sides of Life," is an in-depth analysis of one worker's autobiography. Eriksen asks the question of how the informant uses his or her experiences of 'real' life to create an autobiography. The writing of an autobiography implies an element of 'harmonizing,' and a recognition that experiences and events of a lifetime might be formed as a story. A written autobiography represents the successful consequence of this recognition: life has let itself be formed into a story. The autobiography thus both presents and explains—creating a meaning of a life that has been lived. The autobiography that forms the basis of the present analyses was written in the 1970s by a forest-labourer named Haakon. The autobiography, however, contains two or more versions of episodes in Haakon's life, where the same events are explained in different ways. Thus Haakon expresses quite varying feelings towards the same events in his life. The scenes Haakon keeps reinterpreting represent problems and conflicts in his life, such as what happened when his parents died and when his marriage was dissolved. Anne Eriksen points out that these numerous repetitions are expressions of different attempts to explain why things went wrong. Haakon seeks to place his experiences within a framework that gives a coherent story, but he never succeeds to find the story that may unite all the different themes in his life. From an external view, Haakon's story describes

a rather chaotic and tragic life and Haakon could be described as a 'poor drunkard.' But seen from Haakon's point of view this is not the problem. He refuses to forget the good memories and refuses to accept the perspective of a victim. The constant reinterpretation of his memories is the way that he copes with the contradictions in his life.

Anne Eriksen wrote her doctoral dissertation on culture and religion in the working-class. Two articles in the present publication are based on that work. One article, titled, "Church, Workers and Religion," demonstrates that Norwegian workers possessed a class-specific popular religion, with elements from both Sunday-school Christianity and older traditions. Popular belief was in sharp contrast to the official policy of the Labour Party and the Social Democratic Movement. Whereas the ideologists of the party regarded religion as a 'private manner' and wanted to place the 'necessary information on church and religious history' as part of the history lesson, the 'ordinary worker' rejected the party's attempt to move religion from the public to the private spheres of life. The church, however, was not able to grasp and understand the worker's popular religion. The representatives of the church considered working-class people as religiously indifferent, and even hostile to the church. The workers did not visit the church; therefore, it was believed that the Marxist critique of religion was generally accepted by the working-class. Many vicars were amazed to find that the workers in their parishes attended church regularly.

The autobiographies tell how the workers actually described religion and religious experiences. Erikson finds that religion supplied the workers with a basis for structuring both stories about life and their own lives. The informants used references to religion and religious experiences as a means of characterizing different stages of life and describing the movement from one stage to another. The transitions given most weight are baptism and confirmation. The confirmation, although tied to religion, also has a very important meaning in the Scandinavian folk tradition. With confirmation, childhood ended and working life began. Confirmation marks an important transition, and a change of status both in real life and in the story about life. The confirmation not only put an end to childhood, it put an end to the 'religious' period in life, where you had to concern yourself with endless learning of hymns and psalms.

Now the secular life—the life of work—could start. And, religion and work do not appear as related to each

other in the autobiographies of these workers. Work, not religion, created the social identity. The worker's distance from religion is thus not necessarily caused by a disbelief in or a critical attitude towards religion. Instead, this distance may be due to religion's failure to become integrated with the worker's way of living. The last of Anne Eriksen's articles, "Sunday—Sacred Time and Leisure," is an analysis on what happens on a Sunday in worker's circles, where Sunday has developed from a holy day to a day of rest and leisure. In the autobiographical materials there is much information on how this day is kept, and whether informants are most concerned with the social or the religious content of the day. Today, Sunday is the time for rest and leisure for the whole population. This aspect of Sunday has developed thanks to the working-class. The conception of Sunday as a day of rest and leisure is closely tied to the working-class, and has its origins in the kind of society that created this class. There were no older norms created by other classes and dominated by them. The workers themselves shaped Sunday as a day of leisure activity.

Flemming Hemmersam has written three articles on Danish labour lore, all of which place individual cultural elements into a wider, international context. The article, "Familiar Quotations In The Danish Labour Movement, 1870-1920," is about three crucial quotations in the labour movement from this period: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity;" "Do your duty, demand your rights;" and "Unity makes strong." The author analyses these quotations as a collective poetry 'from below,' revealing elements of the workers' self-understanding. Only a few researchers have collected and tried to analyse these quotations. The empirical material for this study consists of periodicals, newspapers and, above all, the flags and banners that carried the quotations in combination with other symbols from working life.

The author goes back to the first decades of the European labour movement, to trace the origin of the three above mentioned quotations. The notion of Unity is very strong in working-class tradition. It is a favourite quotation on the banners, and commonly used in the names of organizations during the first decades of the labour movement. The author points to the fact that these quotations have to be understood as an integrated part of the workers' 'parole,' a notion found in lots of examples from the everyday life of the workers organizations. "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" dates from the French Revolution. In Denmark it materialized in a number of ways. When new flags and banners were dedicated, it was and still is a custom to bang three nails into the pike: the first for

liberty the second for equality and the third for fraternity. Quotations migrated across national boundaries in the form of party manifestos. Not only the well known, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” but also, “No rights without duties, no duties without rights,” which was abbreviated in Denmark to, “Do your duty, demand your right.” This quotation is used on hundreds of Danish flags and banners. Hemmersam traces this quotation back to a formulation of Giuseppe Manzzini’s, written on the statue of the First International. Flags and banners may use other quotations. The three holy rights is a good example, “Eight hours’ work, eight hours’ sleep and eight hours’ leisure.” However, the three previously-mentioned rights were by far the dominant ones in the period of 1870-1920. The quotation, “Do your duty, demand your right,” was more often used in the provinces than in Copenhagen, whereas “Unity makes strong” was used all over the country. The author points out that the development and use of workers’ familiar quotations are closely related to the development of the Danish labour movement in the 1870s, its decline in the 1880s, and its recovery in the 1890s. The class struggle was intense in those days and one could lose one’s job. The class struggle also involved familiar quotations taken over from others or formulated by the workers themselves. Used on flags and banners, they became part of public manifestations such as demonstrations, strikes and nation-wide labour disputes. They were also used to give names to unions and co-operatives. Each flag and banner represented a large number of people, and workers’ familiar quotations summed up the essence of the Danish workers’ own views on ethics and morality.

Unlike the other Nordic countries during the twentieth century, Finland suffered from violent combats and conflicts between the workers and the ruling classes. These battles are still something of an ‘open wound’ in Finnish history, but the conflicts are seldom mentioned in the literature on workers’ history and culture outside Finland. Ulla Maija Peltonen has worked with conflicts in Finnish history and tradition from various angles. Three of her four articles in this publication are based on her licentiate dissertation, *Memory and Meaning: a study of the formation of the working-class narrative tradition after 1918*, (Helsinki 1994). In her first article, “Workers narrative tradition in Finland after 1918,” Ulla Maija Peltonen deals with the Civil War in Finland in 1918, and the struggle between the ‘Whites’ and the ‘Reds’ which ended with the victory of the ‘Whites.’ The ‘Reds’—Social-Democrats and Communists—were persecuted, and many (about 2.5% of the population) were

placed in camps where they often died from hunger and ill treatment. Civil war and persecution in the following decades of the political left are still a matter of conflict in Finland today. There is still no consensus regarding a name for the war: The War of Freedom (from Russia), the Class War, the Civil War, the National War, the Revolution, or the Rebellion? To the ‘Reds’ the war was first of all a class war.

Although the events of 1918 have been carefully examined, the perspective of those near to or involved in the events have been almost entirely neglected. Ulla Maija Peltonen examines autobiographical material to demonstrate the existence of historical legends and belief legends in the historical tradition of the workers. Using the dual concepts of official and unofficial culture she points out how the ‘handed down’ stories of the humiliating episodes that started in 1918 has helped to maintain a ‘hidden’ resistance to the Whites and to develop a worker’s identity. She takes as her point of departure that 1) the central features of working-class folklore are a worldview and ideology linked to class, thus make it vital to take into account the socio-historical context of folklore; that 2) working-class folklore expresses the perspectives of both the leaders and the members of the labour movement; and 3) working-class folklore is counter-culture or a culture of contestation when it takes a position against the dominant value system or deviates from it. Peltonen uses memoirs from 88 narrators examining the narrators’ key experiences associated with the events of 1918, and their experiences with school, church and court officials.

It was possible for Peltonen to identify the narrators’ value systems, as revealed in their perspectives on official authorities. The memoirs are grouped according to four different themes: 1) narratives concerning despotism; 2) narratives concerning priests; 3) narratives concerning graves and the cherishing of memoirs; and 4) narratives concerning schools and teachers. Peltonen is also able to separate belief legends from the narrative lore and examines—on the basis of 115 belief legends—the concepts of official authority mediated by these legends. She classifies the legends on the basis of the following themes: 1) hauntings at the place of the execution or graveyard, where the ‘Reds’ were executed and buried by the ‘Whites’; 2) hymn singing, crying or voices at the graveside or murder site; 3) haunting at the parsonage; 4) stories detailing the fates of criminals or executioners. (The executioner receives a supernatural punishment—he becomes ill, goes insane or he commits suicide.)

The Reds were treated as political criminals by the 'Whites' after 1918, and approximately 70,000 persons were sentenced for crimes against the state, receiving sentences from two years in prison camp to death. Whereas the Whites were pardoned for their violent acts, many of the Reds lost their fundamental rights as citizens or they were even killed. The Reds' faith in law and justice crumbled. In a difficult situation, the Reds were forced to find their own ways of grieving and remembering their dead—as it was not allowed to openly mourn for those who died in 1918. The Reds created their own traditions for grasping the violent events during and after the battle. The function of the belief tradition was both to replace women's traditional mourning rituals and to reveal and give evidence for the Reds' experience of the immoral actions of the Whites. In the Reds belief tradition—the belief legends—the perpetrators of injustice received their due: e. g., the executioner went insane.

The belief legends functioned within the working-class tradition as collective memoirs. Their role was to publicize the taboo violations committed by the Whites. According to the memoirs, the respect for memory required a proper burial and burial place, but the burial sites and memorials of the Reds were not mapped out until 1969; a national memorial to the Reds was not unveiled to the public until 1970. The events of 1918 gave definition to a working-class identity, and here the tradition played a significant role. Collective concepts of right and wrong in these memoirs appear opposite to perspectives of the judicial system, Church and schools. In this sense the tradition must be interpreted as counter-culture. The workers' oral tradition clearly has the character of a strong class memory. Perceptions of school, church and court authorities were a world of experience and tradition shared by workers. Peltonen stresses that workers' lore can be defined as memoirs linked to everyday experiences with teachers, priests and judges, whereas the lore associated with the cherishing of the Reds who died can be distinguished as both workers' lore and labour lore.

Labour lore is the theme of Peltonen's next article, concerning the "black times" of the 1920s and 1930s, when workers still experienced persecution and injustice. The 113 memoirs studied here were written in response to a questionnaire from the Finnish Communist Party and may thus be classified as a tradition organized by the labour movement. All of the narrators were involved in labour organization activities, and gave a strong sense of unity and collective strength in their memoirs. They can be defined as recollections of the

labour movement, since they concentrate on descriptions of the collective activity of the labour movement members. Peltonen groups the memoirs according to theme: 1) stories of childhood and experiences of 1918; 2) experiences in public resistance, such as demonstrations on May Day and other public demonstrations including strikes at workplaces and prison strikes; 3) stories of masked or covert resistance, circumventing or resisting the law; and 4) narratives concerning power. Peltonen concludes that the workers' memoirs reveal a community of memory. Following the war, communist veterans recounted their experiences in newspapers and books. The lore which tells of the 1920s is in fact a dialectic relationship between both oral and written tradition. Peltonen compares the Finnish memoirs with memoirs gathered from interviews with Italian communist veterans in 1970s. As Alessandro Portelli has pointed out, these narratives contain dreams of a different kind of life and history. They do not tell what happened in reality, but what the narrators wished would have happened. The idea of justice is also central to the memoirs, and the laws are seen as examples—not of justice but of a class justice, which from the workers point of view was not right. The types of folk concepts of justice appearing in the memoirs are reminiscent of the model defined in E. P. Thompson's moral economy of the crowd. The authors point to studies from Sweden and Italy and find similarities in the hidden resistance among Finnish and Italian workers. As in Finland, resistance against fascism appears in small details, as jokes, graffiti, wearing a red tie or whistling an old labour song. The workers' memoirs are closely linked to political activity. They were organized memoirs, linked to the Communist Party's historical agenda. Nearly all the narrators were also party members. They created a specialized branch of Red lore which emphasized the perspective of the labour movement.

To Work, to Life or to Death presents the reader with a new angle on the Labour movement in the Nordic countries, a perspective that differs from the usual harmonious portraits of the Nordic welfare states. Behind the welfare project of today lies decades of fighting and suffering. This history—and especially the history of the Finnish Labour movement—is not well known in the rest of the world. This book is therefore highly recommended to a wider public interested in workers' living conditions and traditions, as well as the Labour movement in the Nordic countries. The book contains lots of empirical material as well as theoretical considerations on the subject of workers' lore and labour lore, hitherto not presented in one publication, and above all not in English! This review

(More an abstract than a critique!) doesn't give credit to all of the interesting points made by the discussion of workers' culture and lore as a field in its own right, as a counter-culture, and as a culture which influenced the dominant society. I strongly suggest that you read the book for yourself! The book has furthermore a very thoroughly elaborated index-system as well as illustrations from the various parts of the workers daily life and from the Labour movement in the Nordic countries.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-labor>

Citation: Anette Vasstroem. Review of Hemmersam, Flemming, ed., *To Work, To Life Or To Death: Studies In Working Class Lore*. H-Labor, H-Net Reviews. May, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1009>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.