

## **Maritime Folk Song as Popular Culture: An Applied Study in Discourse and Social Relations**

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# MARITIME FOLK SONG AS POPULAR CULTURE: AN APPLIED STUDY IN DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Chris McCormick

## "Hideaway"

A working man ain't got a damn thing  
Can't see my way past this crust of bread  
But someday man I'm going to change things.

(Minglewood Band 1981)

## "1925 Strike Song"

Without our union labourers the war would never'd been won  
They are now content to take a bone from those they saved  
from ruin

While profiteers unconcerned are hiding without shame  
Who are other Kaisers in disguise behind another name.

The war gave them the very plate they always longed to fill  
To satisfy their greed for gain while blaming Kaiser Bill  
Justice, mercy, sympathy and pity for the poor  
Is seldom now considered in the rush for wealth and power.

There are many cruel oppressions in the profiteering game  
While selfish greed for power and wealth puts Bill to shame  
We don't condone the Kaiser's deeds he was a mean misfit  
But there are many on the sly the Kaiser's pants will fit.

(MacNeil 1979:35)

Situated on the Eastern Seaboard of Canada, the Maritime/  
Atlantic Provinces<sup>1</sup> are the earliest settled part of Canada, and  
the most impoverished. Historically underdeveloped in relation

to the rest of Canada, this region has for about the last century served as a net exporter of labor and primary products in the form of staples and as a conditioned market for central Canadian manufacturing. In these "hinterland" and "backward" provinces folks songs are, for some, examples of a traditional way of life idyllically preserved. Such folk songs symbolize a close contact with the land and sea, while cherished traditions have been forgotten elsewhere. There are folk songs of rugged individuals engaged in a traditional way of life in fishing, logging, mining, and farming. As modern life becomes increasingly industrialized and privatized, folk songs seem to hold out the hope that the serenity and the challenge of a past form of life can be recaptured. What is forgotten, however, is the life of which such folk songs are a part. Folk songs are taken out of the context of production and romanticized, and this in turn romanticizes Maritime Life. The struggling fisherman becomes the daring and courageous fisherman, the men and boys working in the woods to produce a cash crop to pay off the shopkeeper for another year become the robust and hardy woodsmen. The life of the Maritimes of the past and the present is romanticized and used to create an ideology of Maritime production. It is such an approach to the consumption and analysis of Maritime folk song that this paper addresses, for the peripheralization of the Maritimes is not just a function of material production, it is influenced also by the methods used to analyze the cultural production of the region. In other words, regionalism is related as much to cultural and political matters as to economic problems.

For the most part folk-song studies have been concerned with problems of collection. Seeing their task as one of systematic collection, ethnomusicologists and folklorists have striven to collect the most, the best, and the purest folk songs available. Such a task brings with it an undeveloped problem of analysis: how to account for the possibility of folk-song production. Quite often the tendency is to see the folk song quite simply as a quaint reminder of the "good old days," a regrettable tendency that romanticizes the context within which the folk song is produced and sees its production as a thing of the past. Folk songs are of course still being produced and still say significant things about Maritime Life. But in the search to collect and preserve traditional folk songs, the tendency has been to de-contextualize and romanticize their cultural production. In the Maritime Provinces such a naive desire for

collection over analysis is both an insult to the past and a questionable romanticization of Maritime life. Although the conditions of folk song production are becoming increasingly oriented to mass production and mass consumption, the regional concerns that condition production still exist and persist as cultural topics.

It is easy to portray folk-songs makers and users as quaint, rollicking, foot-stomping folk, as quiet balladeers, ideologically blinded or retarded in their understanding of the context of their own lives. In this way the folk song as a medium of cultural expression is formulated as poetry, as a primitive attempt to divine and convey a barely understood reality. Much of the material of popular culture is still analyzed in this fashion. Such an approach is problematic in that folk song is not seen as an adequate expression of cultural circumstances.

It is the concern of the present analysis not to abstract folk song from its social context, but rather to place it squarely in the context of cultural production. The challenge of analysis requires also that we do not perceive the producers of culture as naive actors. It is therefore necessary to do two things: 1) to situate the analysis of folk song contextually as a product of people oriented to their concerns; and 2) to develop an analysis that does not portray users and makers of folk songs as themselves pre-analytic. The former task is a question of accuracy and sensitivity to history; the latter is a question of analytic fiat and how we conceive that responsibility. This involves balancing the priorities and questions of analysis with the task of doing justice to the cultural production of which folk songs are an integral part.

The present analysis, developed from previous work (see McCormick 1981), considers *selected* traditional and modern folk songs as an analytic topic for cultural studies. Through a presentation of folk song in the Maritimes, culture will be considered as both a topic and a resource for analysis. In this way analysis invokes the responsibility of recognizing that its own production is as cultural as the "things" that it analyzes. Although the folk songs selected are not representative in a statistical sense, they are so in a social sense in that they are used to represent the cultural and material production of the Maritimes. It is proposed that such a study will have implications both for the study of regionalism in Canada and for the more general study of social issues in popular culture.

The major task of this paper is to determine how folk song emerges as an expression of Maritime life. To this end it has not been deemed necessary to utilize a random sample of the thousands of available folk songs. Rather folk songs have been selected that do talk about Maritime life and therefore generate a sense of how folk song functions as a medium of cultural communication and how it can be an emancipatory medium in as much as it expresses emergent understandings of social life. In this way folk songs represent a creative participation in the social construction of a life worth living while concomitantly expressing the limits of that life. Song culture does not just express the limits and possibilities of Maritime regional identity, because in identifying those limits and possibilities song as culture gives us the awareness to work for change. The task is to recover this awareness as an analytic concern, so that analysis can then participate in cultural production. For regionalism is a struggle,<sup>2</sup> and folk song is one way in which that struggle is realized and recreated as a cultural possibility. People do not just act out social roles, but draw on social possibilities within cultural production. Analysis then joins cultural production in that it can remind us of these possibilities.

In that the method of "social analysis" (see *ibid.*) works from the notion of the constitutive use of language in social theory and social life, this paper is concerned with how folk songs exemplify the interest in enquiry into life that the use of language in cultural production expresses. Accordingly, the following patterns of thought are explored: 1) How does folk song express and identify staple production as traditionally the dominant form of production in the Maritime region? Such expression and identification constitutes a special case of how the transition between small-commodity to industrial capitalism is secured, with implications to the present day in terms of how production is both accomplished and seen in the Maritimes. 2) How do Maritime folk songs give insight into the relations of production and consumption, of order and control? What are the emergent understandings available within folk song as an adequate medium of cultural communication? Do these songs identify avenues for change? 3) How is the character of regionalist struggle which is recoverable within folk song both traditional and modern? 4) How are contradictions in Maritime folk song not analytically discouraging, but rather able to specify the precise place where analysis becomes both evident and

useful within cultural production? 5) What implications can be drawn from this analysis for the study of popular culture in general?

### **Analysis: The Cultural Expression of Production**

Material production in the Maritimes has in the main been based on the extraction, semi-refining, and exportation of staples to central Canadian markets and manufacturers. Although at one time an important manufacturing region, the Maritimes suffered a decline after Confederation. Innis (1956; 1978), Lower (1967), and Watkins (1967; 1977), provide good discussions of the importance of staple production and its development. Innis's analysis is particularly relevant to the Maritimes. Forbes (1975; 1977; 1978; 1979) analyzes post-Confederation politics in Canada and their effect on the Maritimes. It is particularly important to note in this context the effective destruction—brought about by trade tariffs and declining support for the Inter-Colonial railroad after Confederation—of the national north-south Maritime trade links and the competitive east-west trading advantages previously enjoyed by Maritime manufacturing. Naylor (1976) discusses the changing nature of capital in Canada and the decline of financial institutions in the Maritimes. With these analyses we get a more accurate picture of the nature of Maritime underdevelopment, and the reason for the dependence on staple production. Once we have recognized the character of production in the Maritimes and have placed it within the context of Canadian development, it is then possible to see the differing character of the mode of production in the Maritimes. No longer is it a matter of the transition between a traditional small-commodity mode of production to industrial capitalism, but the forced underdevelopment of capital in order to sponsor growth in some areas at the expense of others. Once we have identified this fact, then we must replace those staples within their relations of production. Although formulated as critique, McNally's (1981) analysis provides reminders as to how this can be accomplished.

The social relations between labor and the production of staple resources such as oil, natural gas, fur, fish, lumber, and coal are complex. Both in the traditional and the present-day context, production in the Maritimes has had to center on these resources due to the historical pattern of development in Canada. This is not a necessary fact, but a contrived one, contrived, that

is, as the result of policies, both political and economic. The manipulated repression of the Maritime region, reducing its main economic livelihood to dependence on staple production, derives from the unavailability of local venture finance capital (see Naylor 1976) not from a lack of entrepreneurial skill; from centralist development policy, restrictive inter-provincial and international trade tariffs, and the suppression of natural trade patterns (see Forbes 1979); and from the maintenance of a population designed to function as a surplus labor force (see Sacouman 1980; 1981). Although it is perhaps difficult to say at this stage whether the producers and consumers of folk songs "understand" the issues academics have proposed for the historical pattern of underdevelopment in the Maritimes, it is possible to find evidence of the *social relations* of production within folk songs that speak to the same understanding that analysts have.

The proletarianization of the work force, centered on the production of staples, is conveyed, for example, in a song such as "Hard Times."<sup>3</sup> Economic insight into the process of production is translated into a form of cultural production which expresses the material relations of production in an underdeveloped region:

Come all ye good people I'll sing ye a song  
 About the poor people, how they get along;  
 They fish in the spring, finish up in the fall,  
 And when it's all over they have nothing at all,  
 And it's hard, hard times.

(Peacock 1963:21)

This folk song from Newfoundland identifies the character of fishing as staple production and the character of semi-proletarianization in the Maritimes. It does not present the fisherman as a courageous person who challenges the sea and enjoys a pastoral, peaceful way of life. It talks about commodity production under the relations of capital. Not only does the fisherman subsist, he has to exist under the relations of capital, and this involves debts to merchants and to the priest. The song does not give us that broad understanding that we as analysts desire, but it does begin to identify the actual conditions of life in the Maritimes, and this it does non-romantically.

The relations of the production of the fish are not embodied in the fish as a product, because the fish as product does not

reveal the conditions of its own production. The relations of production are, however, conveyed through the folk song as a medium of cultural production. Such songs and stories tell us about the human, social character of production—about the hard work under debilitating and often dangerous conditions with little return—that characterizes staple production in the Maritimes. And this is, of course, as true of mining or logging as of fishing:

“Minto Miners”

Now a Minto miner is a proud hard man  
 He raises his brood the best that he can  
 By the sweat of his brow and the pick in his hand  
 Loadin’ our Minto coal.

Some men work and they earn their bread  
 When the sun is hot and high overhead  
 Some men’s labours go on through the cool of the night  
 When a Minto boy becomes a man  
 He don’t get to see much of the sun again  
 There ain’t no sun at the bottom of the Minto mine.

(Stevedore Steve, n.d.)

“The Ballad of Springhill”

In the town of Springhill in Nova Scotia,  
 Down in the dark of the Cumberland Mine,  
 There’s blood on the coal and the miners lie  
 In the roads that never saw sun nor sky  
 The roads that never saw sun nor sky.

(MacColl & Seeger 1975:42)

“Shantyman’s Life”

Now spring time begins and double trouble does commence  
 When the waters look piercing and cold,  
 Dripping wet is our clothes and our limbs, they are half frozen  
 And our pike-poles we scarce can hold.

(Creighton & Senior 1950:274)



The proletarianization of labor as expressed in Maritime folk songs is a phenomenon not unique to the region. But semi-proletarianization is part of the regional identity, whether it is expressed in songs about fish, lumber, potatoes, coal, or oil. In that regionalism is a material matter, people are drawn into the relations of capital which inevitably reproduce those material conditions in an attenuated form. There are many stories, such as Butler (1977), Fraser (1978), and Leyton (1975) that speak of the effects of increasing dependence upon the capitalist in a small-commodity staple mode of production. Traditionally this entails selling the products of your labor or your labor power to a capitalist, who in turns sells to you, or provides you with, all of the tools of production, and who provides you with the means of subsistence but at an ever-increasing debt. Thus, in that regionalism is not only material, but also cultural, people express these relations of capital in cultural forms, such as folk songs. The medium of culture acts against that privatization which capitalist relations of production impose on people. As people become separated within capitalism from one another, culture is both the expression of, and the medium for, recollecting togetherness, that is, collecting the *social* character of production. As the self-sufficiency of small-commodity production becomes the capital dependency of the proletariat, the reproduction of the work force is not a matter of subsistence, but of the accumulation of capital. In the Maritimes this involves leaving home and going to where the jobs are, whether this be New England, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, or the Yukon (see, for example, Brookes 1981 and Hall 1981). Out-migration is and has been for a long time a constant feature of the Maritimes and would, perhaps, be difficult to understand in other areas:

“The Names Song”

Go off on your way now  
 And may you find better things  
 Don't wait around 'till you have no fare to leave  
 All the best if you're staying  
 All the best if you should choose to leave  
 Here's to kindness on your journey  
 Here's to joy in your new home.

(MacEachern 1979a)

Here the sadness is not, of course, just with leaving, but is mixed up with the fact that many are compelled to return home

because of homesickness, inability to find work, prejudice, or for family reasons. After all, why should a person have to leave home?

In that we can identify staple production as a traditionally dominant mode of material production in the Maritime region, it is significant that folk songs can be found that express that production and speak to its special character, its social relations, and its hazards. Difficult working conditions, unfair wages, death, out-migration, and unemployment are all folk-song topics associated with the semi-proletarianization of the labor force engaged in staple production. That production traditionally is only semi-proletarianized and relies on small-commodity production for subsistence as well makes it all the more hard in that workers are already drawn into the relations of capital. They must depend upon small capitalists for their tools, for certain indispensable products, and as a market for their products. The romanticization of this traditional way of life, although declining, does a severe injustice to the people of the Maritimes. The way of life that is romanticized is the semi-proletarianization that accompanies staple production, underdevelopment, and the maintenance of a surplus population necessary for such production. The character of these social relations of production we can recover in folk songs, and this kind of *cultural knowledge* is a resource for studies such as Veltmeyer (1980), Overton (1980), and Brym and Sacoumen (1979), even though these analyses are not of folk songs.

### **Emergent Understandings**

That folk songs are sung about staple production, out-migration, and semi-proletarianization does not immediately tell us anything about the uses to which such songs are put in terms of the "understandings" generated. While no empirical statement could be made about a pervasive ideology or awareness at this point, it is possible to see what understandings are present in folk songs concerning the social relations of production. Furthermore, it is instructive to see what understandings can be generated from folk songs concerning the economic realities of their time and context. That oral history and folk songs can provide no general theoretical understanding of the character of material production and control is a common charge. It is important to emphasize, however, that we can find folk songs that are concerned with the relations between masters

and workers. Rather than merely criticize the perceived inadequacy of lay accounts, social analysis should stress the importance of insights such as these:

When the storm it is raging tremendous  
 And the thunder is peeling the sky  
 When the whitecaps are rolling to windward  
 With the rain pouring down from the sky,  
 It is then we will roll down our mainsail  
 Our dories we'll have to take in  
 And perhaps we got poor, leaky oilskins  
 We're right drowned wet to the skin  
 And our eyelids are closing together  
 For the want of an hour's good rest  
 While those rogues are all spending your money  
 They are wearing and tasting the best.

(Doyle 1966:51)

'Tis then he'll apply to his merchant  
 In hopes he will grant him relief.  
 But the answer he gets is a cold one  
 And this unto him he will say:  
 "You'd better apply to your member  
 Perhaps he'll relieve you today."

(*ibid.*)

If folk songs were nothing more than "quaint songs," then no political understanding could be generated from songs such as these. But we can generate political understanding from such songs because there are political understandings in them. They provide insights into the relations of production and the relations between masters and workers, capital and labor. Other songs can be found that contradict this example, but no contradictions can be provided for the fact that these folk songs as a medium of cultural production enquire into the nature of that production and express its character.

That folk songs are a way in which the conditions of working life are expressed points to the importance of work as a cultural topic. Many Maritime folk songs, both traditional and contemporary, concern working on the sea, in the mines, in the woods, at Woolco, for Standard Paving, or being out of work. In that work is expressed as an important cultural topic also speaks to how folk songs are a way in which that expression is itself possible. Folk songs as culture are also work, and are

undertaken because they provide understanding of their occurrence. "The Loggers' Plight," for example, addresses the importance of unionizing for better working conditions, and thus presumes as a condition of its own production that cultural expression through folk song is useful. Folk songs have to be a medium able to carry messages such as:

This union is a failure here,  
It never will succeed,  
So form a union of your own  
With Maxwell Lane to lead.

With Maxwell Lane to lead the way  
The victory will be won,  
You'll come to terms with A.N.D.  
The Landon Ladd will run.

(Peacock 1965:III:755)

"The Yahie Miners," an anti-scab song, also exemplifies how folk songs can convey an important social message:

Join the Union right away  
Don't you wait until after pay  
Join the Union right away  
You dirty Yahie miners.

(McCawley 1929:25)

A humorous song, "The Pluck Me Store," also reveals the nature of the conditions of production and exchange:

Come dig the coal ye miner boys  
In summer and in fall.  
For winter time is coming on  
When there'll be no work at all.  
Then heave the coal ye miner boys  
The summer quickly passes  
When working days will all be done,  
But we must have bread and molasses  
The Pluck Me Store, the Pluck Me Store,  
We have to deal at the Pluck Me Store,  
And only a little cash is left  
When bills are paid at the Pluck me Store.

(MacAuley & Dubinsky 1975:34)

Songs have been used for organizing purposes in the Maritimes, for unemployment movements, fisheries confrontations, loggers' unions, miners' strikes, and for political agitation. In this way folk songs express both the lived-in conditions of the

Maritimes, providing emergent understandings of regionalist struggle, and reproduce the possibility of the folk song as a viable medium for the discussion and dissemination of cultural topics and knowledge.

It is the role of the folk song in the generation of emergent understandings that is important here. Much of the sociological analysis of popular culture addresses the question of how the culture of the masses serves to reproduce the relations of domination and subordination characteristic of the relations within which popular culture is generated (see, e.g., Willis 1977; 1978). It is important, however, to analyze how it is possible for culture to be an emancipatory medium, how folk song can express emergent understandings. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide an account of the manner in which cultural expression intervenes in social life, understanding that it is more than just a recreation (see, e.g., Palmer 1979). To see culture as an active force able to generate understandings that can enable change to take place, we need to see how regionalism is a struggle. As Brunton *et al.* (1981) point out:

Variations in the ways of living of the popular classes (petty producer, semi-proletarian, proletarian), in struggles within the popular classes and in struggles between segments of the popular classes and capital are lived experiences that find creative expression not only through overt class conflict but also through cultural mechanisms such as songs (1981:36).

### **Regionalism and Struggle**

The struggle of regionalism can be perceived in the topics that folk songs address. Unfair working conditions, moving to Toronto or Edmonton in search of work, coming home, going on unemployment, trying to unionize—these are all topics which, through folk song, express a regional identity. They are not “typical” folk songs of the ballad type. Working songs in the Maritimes express the alienation produced through working at jobs with little security and low wages. A contemporary example is “Workin’ at the Woolco (Manager Trainee Blues)”:

Taking out the garbage and sweepin’ up the floor  
 Learnin’ how to sell, what an awful bore  
 They promised a promotion but I think it’s a joke  
 Can’t wait for my lunch break to sneak out for a smoke.  
 (Buddy and the Boys, n.d.)

“Don’t Fool Yourself (The Sysco Kid)” is about the production of steel, and the dependence of the town on the industry:

I said “The whole town’s covered with shit.  
 How can you stand to live here?  
 He said “We pretend we don’t see it.  
 Besides we got lots of beer.”  
 I said “Come on Pancho you ain’t that dumb,  
 the whole town’s dull blood red.”  
 He said “What can I say. If you take it away,  
 we may as well be dead.”

(Buddy and the Boys, n.d.)

The social relations of underdevelopment are expressed in traditional songs and in contemporary songs. As Brunton *et al.* (1981) point out, there are folk songs that express “widespread dissatisfaction . . . , political awareness and elements of opposition.” They go on to say that the problem is that such folk songs do not propose solutions to the problems of underdevelopment; but what they do not say is that even this (analytic) problem is part of the struggle of regionalism. They attribute this problem to the fact that there is a “general lack of political organization” and to the “weakness of a radical (socialist) movement in the region” (*ibid.*:35). Yet there are radicals, however ineffective by analytic standards, and there is a political awareness, which is expressed in popular culture through folk songs, folklore, literature, and verse. The authors go beyond mainstream folk-song research in that they speak to the relations of production that enable such songs; their analysis builds on those songs, however, and would not be possible without them. It is necessary to continue the work that folk songs begin; otherwise another type of peripheralization occurs, where local labor is again converted into cultural capital.

“Workin’ at the Woolco (Manager Trainee Blues)” expresses a more contemporary style of work in the Maritimes, to be sure not as physically dangerous as that expressed in “The Unknown Miner’s Grave.” The former points to a gradual shift in the percentage of semi-white-collar employment. This is perhaps one of the advantages of capitalism, that underdevelopment gets safer and more lucrative as time goes on. But there is always a price to be paid, as “Don’t Fool Yourself (The Sysco Kid)” shows. The Maritimes contain many one-company towns, and if the industry pulls out nothing is left. This must, however, be balanced against the fact that jobs are not usually year-round,

and that the industries extract a price for what usually turns out to be a short-term gain at best. But again this is the character of regionalism, that the provincial governments funnel money to industries to locate in the Maritimes; they stay for a time, exploit the land and the people, and then leave. There have been many capitalists of many sorts who have come to the Maritimes, made their fortunes, and then left. Examples of the materialistic exploiter have been cited; here it might be instructive to recall part of a song from the sealing industry's counter-protest against another form of exploitation:

They say the seals are threatened but the evidence is clear  
 With quotas carefully controlled, of that there is no fear;  
 We're the endangered species who live by coastal seas,  
 We kill the seal as we kill fish to feed our families.

A bedlamer boy from Greenpeace he chained on to the "whip,"  
 And was dunked into the water by the rolling of the ship;  
 We had a job to save him in all the fuss and racket,  
 But I bet his pelt wouldn't have been worth as much as a  
     Ragged Jacket.

When Brigitte said in Paris she cuddled a whitecoat dear,  
 Sure every swiler in the land he grinned from ear to ear;  
 He knows from long experience she's pilin' on the lies,  
 A real whitecoat's talons would have slashed her face and eyes.

They call us cruel, barbaric, hunting seals just for the thrill—  
 These pampered city slickers that a day's hard work would kill  
 What do they know of challenges of storm and sea and ice  
 That dare the blood to answer and pay the sealer's price.

(Scammell 1979:78)

The uneven regional underdevelopment that makes the Maritimes a peripheral region is not just economic. The character of regionalism is evident in the political and cultural spheres as well. This uneven regional underdevelopment relies on the production of staples even to this day as the material preconditions of the reproduction of those conditions of life and work that we then call regionalism. That center-periphery relations have traditionally traded on an unequal relationship in the sphere of exchange predicated on the unevenly underdeveloped forms of material production is not news. What is revealing, however, is that we can find an awareness of these conditions in a cultural form that does not just reflect those conditions. Brunton *et al.* (1981) to the contrary, there are songs

which do not just identify the “culprits,” so to speak, but also advocate change, such as unionism and agitation—“The Yahie Miners,” for example, cited above.

Because some folk songs do portray these social conditions and discuss the social relations of production that are analytically important, folk songs as cultural production embody the possibility of emancipation from those selfsame limits and conditions. This is what Brunton *et al.* (1981) do not see, that the possibility of cultural emancipation through the analysis of folk song itself trades on the folk song as an adequate expression of lived-in conditions; they do not ground the possibility of cultural emancipation as an analytic topic within that medium that acts as a resource for informing that analysis. This again is another side of the struggle of Maritime regionalism, that folk songs are either romanticized or trivialized as vehicles of cultural knowledge.

The problem is then exacerbated when folk songs are equivocal in the presentation of contradictory, often mutually antagonistic, accounts of the possibility of the social world and its character. It is difficult then for action to arise from cultural understanding. How are we to understand the regionalist struggle through culture when that culture is itself ambiguous?

Struggle in the Maritimes is expressed in topics such as unionization, strikes, poor conditions, political repression and interference. There is then a difficulty with folk songs such as “The Jam on Gary’s Rock” (MacEachern 1979b:42), which chronicles a fatal disaster in the workplace, but does not tell us why the men had to take the risks that they did. In this sense Brunton *et al.* (1981) are absolutely right. The failure to identify the actions of elites, the romanticization of the workplace, the glorification of the fighting man and the working man, the chauvinism against the housewife, the “credit” given to the storekeeper for “making opportunities available,” all contribute to the mystification of the conditions of semi-proletarianization and regionalist struggle. This is to say that analytically we want folk songs to embody the class struggle of regionalism. This identifies our interest as analysts. That the message of folk songs are contradictory when considered as a whole can be said to divide the “working class” among themselves and from the “talking class,” and furthermore divide them from an understanding of the economics of coercive capitalist accumulation as they are expressed in the uneven underdevelopment of



regionalism. These divisions then also reproduce the separation from an understanding of how cultural production can reveal and thus condition the limits of regionalist struggle through the formation of social identity through folk song. This is not then to talk about the difference between appearance and reality, or true and false consciousness, and thus to explain how ideological distortions impede the transformation of the conditions of production and exchange. We can excuse, but not explain, the contradictions of cultural production by saying that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please” (Marx 1963:15).

The struggle of regionalism is not in any simple sense thwarted by the contradictions to be found in folk songs in that these contradictions are part of the struggle. Maritime folk songs contain both mystified and emergent understandings of the relations of production as a cultural topic, and so the task is to place cultural analysis within the possibility of generating an emancipatory understanding. There must be a good reason for analyzing folk song, just as there is a good reason for producing it; for example:

#### “A Sealing Song”

Early in the month of March the sealing is beginning  
 While back there in the abattoirs the butchers they are skinning  
 Baby lambs and baby hams to clothe and feed the nations  
 While sealers brave the elements to reach their destination.

Johnson in his Lady ship sails on the north Atlantic  
 He keeps his head to all that's said despite the protest frantic  
 Davies and that Greenpeace bunch are screaming with emotion  
 While simple men are labouring out on the frozen ocean.

Living in the stormy white all in the dead of winter  
 Slaving in this bloody hell the papers call adventure  
 Facing death with every step to feed his wife and family  
 Loving not the deed he does nor does he find it manly.

Actresses and Congressmen come in the fair blue morning  
 Caring not for man or seal, publicity they're yearning  
 Cowhide gloves and moneyed belts caress the tearless whitecoat  
 Each year this plastic pantomime is enacted on the ice floes.

The protest is big business now, yes bigger than the sealing  
 To people all around the world for money they're appealing  
 While falsities and pictures and emotions they're deceiving  
 From people who are blinded untold billions they're receiving.

Now to conclude and finish, of my people I will tell  
 A thousand men have frozen still out on the Arctic hell  
 Some say they are barbarians, our dignity they slander  
 While I am proud to tell you, I'm a native Newfoundlander.  
 (O'Driscoll 1979:72)

As the song shows, there is more than one type of imperialism, and that there is a double irony to the sealing protest when advocates of those that control the semi-proletarianized nature of the economy cannot understand the work necessary to that form of life. The detractors of the seal hunt have such a romanticized notion of what counts as production that they cannot see the contradictions in their own life-style that enable them to protest the seal hunt. Thus folk song is an adequate medium for identifying and protesting the protestors. It does not show the conditions that analysis says are responsible for the necessity of hunting seal, but perhaps that just shows where analysis becomes cultural work, with knowledge it itself can constitute.

### **The Analysis of Ambiguity in Cultural Production**

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Marx 1963:15).

The above phrase is often used to explain the difference between analytic priorities and lay understandings. This way of "explaining" the difference between essentially two ways of accounting for the character of the world asserts that laymen are limited in their capacity to understand the old order and create a new one. It is not just that certain understandings about the world might not be preferred to others, but that the possibility of generating understanding is said not to be possible. This is akin to our notion in sociology of cultural hegemony. The assertion does not explain anything, however, unless we agree with it, because it is itself an account about the character of the world. In that it says it expresses the character of limits to understanding in the world, it itself limits our understanding of limits. That there are said to be limits within which we work, by way of explanation, is now through assertion a limit that we work within.

The problem is one of understanding the notion of limits within the production of cultural contradictions; the problem

is also one of comprehending how the notion of limits to understanding and action is used to provide the warrant, the fiat for analytic accounts. For now we not only have the problem of what emergent understandings there are within Maritime folk song, but the more general problem within cultural analysis of how one cultural account (analysis) can say what counts as another (lay expression).

The contradictory nature of folk songs in the treatment of their topics is found in many areas, such as gender roles, work, war, duty, responsibility, and capitalism. An example is the gender stereotyping of "The Lovely Newfoundlander":

She can row a boat and catch the fish,  
And make a home, she runs it,  
Her garden plants, potatoes grows,  
Her work she never shuns it.

She knows just when to talk a lot,  
She knows when to keep silent,  
She can sing and dance and take a chance,  
In rows she's never violent.

(Peacock 1965:II:370-71)

The song stereotypes women's work, but it is also important to remember that in a semi-proletarianized society the social roles are stereotyped. The social relations of production in a fishing society, for example, involve men going out on the sea fishing, or mending nets, while the women keep the house, prepare the meals, and take care of the children. What is surprising is that the song does not mention all the bad aspects of such a job. The problem is not that the song stereotypes, but that it romanticizes women's work.

That roles are prescribed in folk songs is not surprising. Folk songs, folklore, and oral history have traditionally all been a source of social wisdom, that is, knowledge of roles, attitudes, and obligations. Rules for social conduct and acceptable behavior, prescriptions for understanding and interpreting daily life, the encouragement of hard work and discipline, moderation, the difference between drinking and alcoholism, the difference between a compassionate employer and an unjust one, all are topics treated by folk songs. In this sense folk song is educative.

That folk songs speak against social injustice at times, and also provide strict definitions of what constitutes the competent

wife (or husband) is of course contradictory. But the contradiction is the same as that between one newspaper and another; there is no reason to expect that one speaker has the same interests in speaking as another. This is the first solution to the problem of contradiction in popular culture: that as analysts we tend to gloss over the reasons for the differences in cultural topics while constructing a notion of homogeneity of cultural items such as folk songs in order to facilitate analysis.

In expressing social injustice as a limit against which to work, there is constituted in turn a limit to what counts as social injustice. The specification of the capable woman as a family laborer in small-commodity production (albeit romanticized) we can treat as a stereotype, but that is because we have distance from the conditions within which such work occurs. The problem becomes then not one of either contradiction or stereotyping, but that the role model as praise does not promote discussion as to what would count as a viable socialist alternative for women's work. But then this is our topic.

The male counterpart is found in the "All Round Newfoundlanders":

He tills the ground, erects his home, and fells the mighty tree  
 From which he builds his sturdy boat that rides the raging sea;  
 He's miner, sailor, farmer and mechanic all in one,  
 And although his deeds are legion, yet to him they're merely fun.  
 (Mars 1924:28)

That this folk song could (as culture) initiate change while stereotyping appears impossible. But it does enable us to discuss the attitudes to work that are available. Even though we may be dissatisfied with the contradictions and romanticizations in this song, we can still topicalize those dissatisfactions. And if we as analysts can do this, then there is no reason to assume that lay "men" cannot.

The Maritimer has always gone to war, whether through a sense of nationalism, patriotism, or the need to have a job of some sort. More often than not he is called upon to fight someone else's battles. Maritimers have always been a part of Canada's security forces, and it is still a "cultural" alternative to enter the Armed Forces or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The element of despair occasioned by needless death in battle as found in the folk song "Maudite Guerre" is contradicted by the glorification of serving and dying in war as found in "Undaunted Brave Canadians":

Mon père est mort  
 Mes frères morts  
 Ma terre ruines  
 Ma belle maries  
 À cause de la maudite guerre.  
 (1755, n.d.)

The part which Canada has played since first the war began  
 Has won the admiration of all nations 'neath the sun  
 Her brave and valiant soldiers made a record for all time  
 In future history's pages will their deeds of glory shine.

Their glorious deeds and gallant deaths should dry a piteous eye  
 Save your tears for cowards and put safety first your guide  
 Trust in God who sees your loss, your sorrow, grief and pain  
 That your sorrow may be turned to joy when all shall meet again.  
 (MacEachern 1979b:34)

Again the problem is that the two songs do not have the same message; naturally we prefer the song which does not glorify war, but the problem with "Maudite Guerre" is that it does not go beyond despair. In this sense what appears to be a contradiction is a case of culture not speaking enough about the conditions within which it occurs.

Similar contradictions can be found in the glorification of the working man, and the degrading work that men must do; in the condemnation of bosses and merchants, and the praise of the company. In each case of contradiction we are saying that folk songs as a whole contain these different messages, but again this struggle of regionalism involves contradictions and ambiguity. That is part of the struggle. That contradictions within cultural production are defeating of any movement that attempts to embody alternatives specifies both the limits that the production of culture attempts to recognize and transcend. That contradictions impede transformations by promoting and perpetuating limits also shows how limits that are in any sense worked within are bespoken by the medium of raising the limits of cultural and material production to the level of discourse. It is not just disheartening then that we find contradictions within folk song; contradictions are the topic within culture and for the analysis of that culture of the limits within which cultural production occurs. Contradictions should encourage us to do more work, and encourage that work which analyzes folk songs to emancipate the very creation of cultural production from those limits it sets itself.

The warrant of analysis is often grounded in how analysis talks about the social world. The warrant of analytical interest is often said to be occasioned by the world, as if analysis does not speak and (re)create the character of the world; the warrantability of analysis is in how the world is spoken of. That we could ever say that people make history but that they do not make it just as they please appears to uncover the preconditions of production, to uncover the fact that there are limits and constraints which constitute what cultural production is possible. But if, for example, folk song recreates the limits within which it occurs by speaking those limits through song, then analysis also recreates those limits as limiting through its speech. So analysis does not just then speak of limits within which culture occurs, it constitutes them, and this is a form of imperialism.

It appears that conditions shape production because of their unconditionality. People make history, but because history is unconditional, production reproduces the preconditions of production which unconditionally condition the making of history. Yet to say such a thing is to say that one of the unconditional conditions of capitalist society is that some people can see/say what conditions are unconditional, and that others are not. To say that there are certain unconditional conditions that influence the making of history is to enter into history at that very point where some conditions are said to be unconditional. Analysis then has the responsibility for the unconditionality of conditions in the speech of the analysis of cultural production. The ambiguities and contradictions then to be found within Maritime folk song are ambiguous and contradictory within analysis, but within the culture for which they are produced they are adequate expressions of the struggle of regionalism. Folk songs are emancipatory in that they contain emergent understandings of social conditions. And part of this struggle is working through the contradictory understandings we have of social life.

In order to say that people make history but not in conditions of their own choosing is to begin with the notion that such a saying is itself unconditional. The analytic fiat for making such a claim is carried through the discursive force of its assertions. Here the challenge for historical materialism, that analysis which could be concerned with unconditional conditions, is to ground the possibility of its practice within the way it speaks

about the world. If we are concerned with the contradictions within folk song, then we must topicalize that dissatisfaction within cultural production, which requires saying that limits found within folk songs are not just limiting, but enabling, because they enable the analysis of folk song as regionalist struggle.

Through situating folk song within the material conditions of its production, and within cultural production itself, we can identify the limits to regionalist struggle that are conveyed in Maritime folk song. This then enables us to begin the work of recovering the possibility of organizing alternatives. For we have seen that Maritime folk song does contain emergent understandings. It remains to develop that understanding. As Stuart Hall says:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture—already fully formed—might be simply “expressed.” But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture” matters. Otherwise to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it (1981:239).

### **Beginning Cultural Analysis**

The task of a cultural analysis that centers the production of culture within people’s work involves several considerations, as they develop out of this analysis of Maritime folk song. These can be used as stages of enquiry, or as a “theory” to inform enquiry which places popular culture within production.

#### 1) *Production is not just material production*

Cultural production both finds its place within material production, and speaks to that production. In this way culture is not simply ideological, or a reflection of the base of production, even though it can display at times ideological understandings. Cultural production can embody emergent understandings which can then be used for emancipatory purposes within social life. This is especially important in the Maritimes, where both the material organization of production, and the cultural expression of that production are distinctive of the region.

- 2) *The romanticization of cultural production is part of the hegemony that we call peripheralization*

Center-periphery relations exist both in the cultural and in the material spheres. It is necessary to counter this romanticization as it exists within cultural analysis. This can be applied to folk song, but also to folk art, social history, folklore, and tourism.

- 3) *The regionalism of the Maritimes finds its expression within the struggle of work and culture*

That this struggle exists as a cultural topic is positive for discussing alternatives. That this struggle is at times ambiguous and contradictory is not the problem of popular production. In using ambiguity and contradiction as the place to make its point, analysis can transform emergent understandings into emancipatory ones. This then places the interest of analysis back within the production of culture.

- 4) *Popular culture is not just interested in relating things, but in the social relations of production between people which enable things*

In the same way that capitalism is about acquiring things, folk song seems to be about staples, roles, and wars. Similarly, folk-song analysis usually involves the problems of collection, that is, collecting as many things as possible. The possibility of any thing, however, is within cultural and material production, within people's activities. It is with people that analysis must concern itself, not things, not data. Emancipatory understanding within cultural production is ideological, and it is theoretical, and must display that interest through recollecting its place as an active intervention within production, and not just be concerned with collection. Folk song is not about things, but about people, and it is these people that produce the staples, the songs, that adjudge the roles, that suffer the wars, and that are analyzed.

- 5) *In that cultural production is discursive production, discourse must be theorized as a medium both for the expression of social life, and for its transformation*

In this way people do not just act out social roles, but draw upon cultural possibilities available to be enacted. Folk song is one medium that embodies these possibilities. Contradictions



within cultural expression are places to analyze the choice of futures people see available to them. This can give us an indication of the lived-in conditions of the Maritimes, as these are made available within culture as discourse. When this is coupled within an analysis of the topics that folk song addresses, this enables enquiry to recollect the power of discourse within social and cultural production.

### NOTES

1. The Maritime Provinces are New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Recently the term "Atlantic Provinces" has come into use, which also includes Newfoundland. In this paper the term "Maritimes" is used to refer to all four in general.

2. The work of Sacouman (1982) has been helpful for this formulation.

3. All the folk songs presented here are, in the main, excerpts only, for the verses are presented for purposes of analysis rather than for purposes of collection.

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