
NOTES AND REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEW:
*THE PRACTICE OF FOLKLORE**

Bronner, Simon J. 2019. *The Practice of Folklore: Essays toward a Theory of Tradition*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 382 pages.

The book sets an ambitious goal of reviewing the past and current trends of folklore studies, as well as outlining its possible future directions. The analysis is multidirectional: Simon Bronner reaches the core of the discipline by redefining its fundamental concepts while at the same time covering a variety of topics both directly involving folklore and revolving around it. The book addresses a wide range of contemporary social, political, economic and technological issues that intertwine with the ways folklore is studied, perceived and practiced.

Indeed, as the title of the volume suggests, practice is the kernel around which Bronner constructs his theoretical framework. He often explicitly contrasts it with another key concept in folklore research, namely performance. While the latter is often singular and, as a result, non-generalisable, practices are “repeated, variable social actions” (p. ix) as well as “purposeful [...], reasoned, symbolic, framed, connotative, and expressive” (p. xi). Using practice theory as an analytical tool helps researchers to establish connections between people’s actions and their ways of thinking, typify (but not universalise) individuals and communities and explore the adaptations of folklore to various circumstances (p. xiii).

Another crucial concept that Bronner discusses and integrates into practice theory is tradition. He argues that this concept constitutes an important part of this theory in general, and folkloristics’ particular contribution to practice theory is “to view tradition as a kind of shapeable, contestable norm within which social agency can be enacted” (pp. 35–36). As no agency exists without any implication of power relations, Bronner also discusses the ways in which tradition can be subversive to authority and encourage a multiplicity of individualised practices in times of modernity (p. xii).

The book consists of three parts, each of which accomplishes its own goal. The first part is dedicated to ideas related to practice theory, as well as its applicability to folklore research, and offers analytical strategies and (re)evaluations of academic approaches towards folklore. This part opens up with a discussion about the performance approach in folklore studies, the social and academic environment in which it emerged and its limitations. It is thus contrasted to practice theory, which is a more comprehensive approach to human activity that emphasises the process and repetitiveness of acting rather than particular actions per se. Bronner also explains how folklore studies can

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supplement and substantiate practice theory by underscoring the embodied nature of many activities and explaining the meaning of everyday behaviours and ideas. In the next essay of this chapter, the author also conceptualises tradition as “handy” and “a cultural resource *at hand* [that] represents everyday processes” (p. 37). Using this metaphor, Bronner illustrates how people think of tradition and how tradition can be used to analyse the meaning of cultural practices. He also places the notion of tradition in contemporary context and explains why tradition is necessary as a factor of modernity. In the final essay of this chapter, he analyses Dan Ben-Amos’s (1971: 13) definition of folklore as “artistic communications in small groups” and the context in which it emerged. He then proceeds with a discussion of the new environment of the digital age, which challenges this definition and poses new demands to the discipline of folkloristics. At the end of the chapter he suggests his own definition of folklore as “traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from, practice” (p. 76) and explains the importance of including tradition in the definition, as it implies the process of transmitting ideas and values, as well as practices that ensure their continuity, repetitiveness and variability.

The second part, “Practices and Practitioners”, illustrates the theoretical framework outlined earlier with four particular examples from American narrative culture and beliefs. The first example analyses the folk character of the Boogieman as a means to accommodate fears of sexual molestation and distrust of strangers (p. 88). The research subject of the second essay is the phrase “Who’s your daddy?”, which is chanted, shouted or uttered in various settings situated on the borderline between play and aggression. The phrase epitomises patriarchal speech that expresses anxieties about what is perceived as endangered masculinity in contemporary society governed by egalitarian values (pp. 124–125). The third essay employs the framework of folk psychology to explain why people connect violent behaviour with mental illness. The essay explicates assumptions about bad or

absent parenting, the massification of society, the absence of a clear boundary between reality and fiction, and enfeebled masculinity (pp. 148–149). The last example in this chapter is a bawdy sailor song about Barnacle Bill. Bronner contrasts the hypermasculinity of this song to the context of feminisation in contemporary society, and interprets it as a symbol of separation from domestication, which is especially associated with urban culture (pp. 195–197). Even though the examples represent different folklore genres, the process and the conclusions of Bronner’s analysis remain coherent throughout the chapter. He uncovers historical precedents of contemporary folklore expressions, looks for the etymology of the key terms in various sources and links folklore practices to the gender issues that arose with modernisation. The author also describes the context in which these narrative expressions are used. This context, as well as the folklore examples themselves, will be more familiar to a Northern American reader; however, the chapter provides enough background information for a reader from a different background to be able to follow the author’s argument.

The last chapter of the book discusses the applications of practice theory to spheres that lie outside of the realm of verbal narrative culture. The first essay of this chapter illustrates how Amish economic activities have been recently shifting from agriculture to the establishment of small enterprises, including their participation in farmers’ markets. Bronner argues that this occupational trajectory not only does not ruin the folkness of the Amish, but, on the contrary, helps them to preserve the communitarian values that constitute the core of their ideology and identity (pp. 236–237). The chapter also brings up the important issue of the role of folklorists and other scholars as mediators between the Amish and the world (pp. 209–210, 225; cf. Strang 2003). The second essay adopts a comparative approach to European and American folklore scholarship. A case in point is the celebration of “The Year of Folklore” in the Netherlands in 2005. Looking at the representations of folklore during this event (as well as other non-American

institutionalised forms of folklore, such as the Latvian Song and Dance Festival and Karnataka Folklore University), Bronner uses inductive reasoning to analyse the various interactions between public and academic folklore work. He also uses the methodological framework of high- and low-context cultures (Hall 1989: 105–116) to explain the variety of ways in which folklore is practiced in different countries. The third chapter follows the development of folk museums in the US. The author also evaluates the outreach of the concept of ‘folk museum’ beyond folk museums per se, i.e. its impact on folklife centres, other types of museums and academic disciplines. He concludes that folk museums still remain relevant in contemporary society due to their adaptation strategies and their important contribution to critical thinking (pp. 270–271). The final essay of this chapter also serves as a conclusion to the entire volume. In this essay Bronner analyses the trends in American folkloristics during the past three decades, continuing and extending his earlier work *American Folklore Studies* (1986). He employs a statistical analysis of the most popular keywords in American folklore research (as evident from the talk titles at the American Folklore Society annual meetings) and compares them on various levels, though different time periods and also to the keywords used by the mostly European participants in the Society for International Ethnology and Folklore meetings. On this basis, Bronner argues that, even though performance still dominates the conceptual landscape of American folkloristics, it is necessary to shift the focus of analysis towards practices, their cognitive sources, symbolic meanings and transmission strategies (pp. 288–289). The author coins the prefix ‘hyper’ to refer to the accelerating pace of information transmission in our time and points out how the various convergences of the contemporary world call for new approaches from folklore scholars. He concludes with an empowering and optimistic message by arguing that folklorists (as well as scholars in other domains of cultural studies, the boundaries between which are becoming fuzzier) have an important role as they “do

a service in our accelerating age to explain where the action is” (p. 296).

The book consistently represents the author’s argument, laying out the theoretical framework and illustrating it with a wide range of examples. Some parts of the book may have benefitted from a more extensive cross-cultural comparison so as to explore whether the conclusions that the author derives from his examples hold true for different societies. On the theoretical level, one of the central issues of this work lies in the perceived contradiction between performance as a singular event and practice as a repeatable set of actions. The two concepts are thus set in direct opposition, whereas it would also be stimulating to explore where the border lies between them, what degree of repetitiveness is necessary for a set of actions to be conceived as practice and under what circumstances individual performances can accumulate to constitute a notable folk practice. These suggestions in no way diminish the academic and public value of the book, which is an important milestone in contemporary folklore research. Rather, they demonstrate that Bronner’s work inspires further reflections on the theoretical foundations of folkloristics, challenging future scholars with pursuing the author’s agenda of establishing folklore studies as an indispensable analytical tool in the age of modernisation, acceleration and digitalisation.

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