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Back to the Future: Folk, People, (Who)Man

Volk heisst nicht der Pöbel auf den Gassen, der singt und dichtet niemals, sondern schreit und verstümmelt. (“The people are not the mob of the streets, who never sing or compose, but shriek and mutilate.” – J.G. Herder)

The issue for discussion needs to be located first in a historical and cultural specificity, and Herder’s fierce distinction is a convenient marker of that place. The project of ethnomusicology founds itself on an ambiguity in Enlightenment anthropology, which is at the same time a political wager. Herder’s innocence is irrecoverable. But that loss is itself potent. We can hope to uncover the implicit conditions of a discursive regime that conditions, still, the terms of scholarly trade – including its utopian afterglow.

What object motivates Herder’s distinction? I would say, *commodity*. But of course its role has become more complex and more pervasive than in his world. The *Volk/Pöbel* as a whole buy and sell their own songs, chase their own tail, prostitute their own tale, consume themselves. This has long since become so taken for granted as to be invisible; commodity has the status of what, in the Hegelian language given renewed currency by Jameson and Žižek, we can call a ‘vanishing mediator’. The wheels, then, have long since come off the people’s wagon. To the extent that this regime has been spread worldwide, what started as specific has become, at least as tendency, universal. And to the extent that ethnomusicology is complicit in this process – scholarly reification the flip side of commodity fetishism – it has been a colonising force in a far deeper sense even than postcolonial critique has realised. The branding of ‘world music’, in scholarship as much as in the music industry, seals the deal.

Ethnomusicology, like musicology *tout court*, is, as Bohlman has told us, unavoidably a 'political act'. It should act, then. It is, we might say, *called* to act; its gestures should be given, and give, voice. But to whose call will it respond? What manner of body politic will it call into being? Is it not more than time for shrieks and mutilations?

Why so? And why does Herder's language point towards beastliness - for us, unavoidably, towards the sounds of the torture-chamber, concentration camp, farm factory, slaughter-house: industrialised meat? The question returns us to specificity, here to the anthropological project as such within which Herder finds his place. The quest of what has been called the 'anthropological machine' (see e.g. Giorgio Agamben's *The Open*, 2004) is for the true nature of man - his species-essence, as the young Marx would call it. John Blacking's *How Musical Is Man?* is the classic ethnomusicological gesture in this tradition (and it is worth adding that the 'musicological machine', towards which Herder also points, runs parallel to its anthropological analogue; the moral economy of ethnomusicology draws on both). But what if the Neanderthals also sang, as Stephen Mithen argues (*The Singing Neanderthals*, 2005)? Not to mention the other hominids. What about the great apes, whales, frogs, birds - and sirens, mermaids, angels and other mixed creatures? The search for origins is always a search for the self. The machine always ends up dissecting not so much its exotic historical and cultural object as its subject - modern man. The Lacanian 'object voice' - *A Voice and Nothing More*, as Mladen Dolar (2006) puts it, voice as such; at the limit, the shriek stuck in the throat, language mutilated beyond meaning - registers the impossible-real knowledge of the internal fractures that form this creature.

In a moment that, to many, feels post-historical, it is not difficult to identify (even, for many, to celebrate) the death of the Folk, of the People, of Man himself. But the fractures cleaving the human animal and thus traversing the field of natural philosophy animate also the social formation of the human family - the hierarchies of race, gender, class and sexuality; in a society structured in dominance 'nature' is always an ambivalent value, and so long as the nature of the

Low, nature as low, the low as apparently natural, continue to shape these hierarchies, so long will the vernacular – the *verna*, enslaved but also native born – insist that there is history, still, to be lived, struggle to be waged. ‘Perhaps the body of the anthropophorous animal (the body of the slave) is the unresolved remnant that idealism leaves as an inheritance to thought (Agamben) – a disjunction marked, above all, by the manoeuvres of embodied and disembodied voice, put at issue more than ever by the machinery of technological mediation; can the object speak, sing, think? Yes: the shriek I hear is that of its protest at the mutilation of this remnant – which at the same time references a self-mutilation by the Low’s oppressive other.

The actors in this drama, within and without – within the self, within the social – return us one last time to the concrete: for in the present moment, with the ever more intense compression of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ – for which ‘world music’ can stand as an exemplary sign – the political stakes for the subject *anthropos* are not separable from the fate of creation itself. The disciplinary path might run from ethnomusicology, through a ‘demo-musicology’, to – what? A science of sounding bodies? What would need to be given up to attain this goal? Chains, certainly (to adopt Marx and Engels’s formulation), here disciplinary chains (at least). But we must look beyond the purview available to nineteenth-century revolutionaries. The world, world music too, is not there to be won, for, like the Low as such, it is tired of the theatre of ownership. The price to be paid, then, lies close to home, and the fetters are those of the self – self-possession.

‘Men as a species completed their evolution thousands of years ago; but humanity as a species is just beginning its.’ (Walter Benjamin)