

THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES ON TRADITIONAL POPULAR CULTURE

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1. On Cultural Variation

This essay aims to alert specialists in culture and social scientists to the use of the authentic cultural heritage of Latin American people, which has been forged throughout their history and is currently in full self-development and, to a large extent, undergoing rapid transformation.¹

We start from the general assertion that Latin America is multi-ethnic and multinational, making its cultural issues inherently complex. To a greater or lesser degree, Latin American culture is predominantly mestizo and dazzlingly creative in all its manifestations.² Therefore, before addressing the topic, we will attempt to define what we understand by culture.³

First, let's place culture in its real context: one cannot speak of culture "per se," nor can culture in general be understood, nor art in general, nor man in general, as they are abstractions that only have validity when framed within specific historical limits. This means that both man, culture, and art are historically and socially grounded; they are and always will be concrete and objective elements.

Therefore, we must understand culture as "that complex of elements that preserves and synthesizes the collective experience that a people accumulates throughout its historical development." In this sense, it is "a collective memory that is transmitted from generation to generation as a social (not biological) inheritance, enabling individuals to integrate normally into the community, thereby imparting the values, knowledge, and skills inherent to it."

However, the elements of culture are not all at the same level; they are hierarchized. This means that each society inherits, restructures, and reinterprets (strictly speaking) the accumulated heritage of its past history: it selects, hierarchizes, and consecrates its cultural elements according to the needs and aspirations of its present social practice. Thus, "culture is the synthesis of material and spiritual values that express, with their presence, the particular historical

experience of a people and represent the outcomes of its peculiar social physiognomy, its collective personality." Analyzed in this way, culture no longer appears as an abstract and generic entity but is loaded with concrete content, with its social, regional, and temporal determinations and qualities, as national culture, that is, as the organizing framework of national self-awareness.

Understanding culture in this way, as the result of concretely determined historical and social processes, we can infer that the various stages, groups, and classes that make up a society, elaborate and transmit cultural values differently. Hence, in Latin American societies, we have two types of culture: official culture and popular culture—both types interrelated and independent that, according to the social interests that determine them, interpret the values of culture differently.

The culturally hegemonic groups have an institutionalized culture, while the subaltern groups express it through non-institutionalized channels, such as orality and tradition.

In this sense, we can say that we are dealing with two types of culture: erudite, official, purportedly universal culture, the social product of the hegemonic or dominant groups, and popular culture, the social product of the subaltern strata, which manifests not only its ethnic and class character but also the result of its interrelation with the socially dominant groups in the different historical processes of the national society in which it develops.

But what do we understand by popular culture?

Popular culture, defined as the culture of subaltern groups, does not represent uniform values but hierarchizes various elements within itself that have emerged due to different historical processes.⁴

This means that we cannot equate popular culture with folklore, as the latter is only part of popular culture, but does not encompass it entirely. Traditional popular culture is, as Antonio Gramsci points out, the most genuine part of popular culture, the most authentic, as it expresses the worldview and life conception of the subaltern groups, implicitly or explicitly opposing the values of the hegemonic groups.⁵ Gramsci also shows us that traditional popular culture is not a pure and organized element, but the sum of unelaborated and unsystematic conceptions that reflect many elements that have been left behind from the various historical processes experienced by the large social groups.

Within popular culture, there are different levels, which can be succinctly and broadly outlined as follows:⁶

Traditional Popular Culture: It is the ongoing and collectivized traditional oral legacy, transmitted non-institutionally from generation to generation, representing the most important values insofar as they largely embody the essence of national identity and the germ of popular national culture.

Proletarian Culture: It is the product of popular groups linked to industrial production, gradually emerging, sometimes with traditional roots and other times created in the heat of the factories. It is authentic culture but not traditional or folkloric; it can integrate into the traditional set as it becomes accepted by the social group in which it lives. In other words, as it becomes collectivized.

Peasant Culture: It is the non-traditional product of men living in the countryside, increasingly subjected to the social pressures implied by the insertion of the dominant mode of production—in our case, capitalism—which destroys cultural patterns and creates others outside the values of a popular nature. Within peasant culture, it is essential to consider the ethnic variable and its cultural components, which are, to some extent, traditional, but in other respects, are not, according to the historical process that originated them.

Nevertheless, in Latin American countries, it could be said that most of the peasant culture is integrated into folklore, although an increasingly broad sector, due to industrial development, transforms its traditional conceptions. This sector depends on the different ways in which the capitalist mode of production is articulated in Latin American agriculture, obviously without forgetting the ethnic connotation.

In other words, much of traditional popular culture is nourished by the peasant, but not all peasant culture can be folkloric. Hence the importance of studying and understanding the historical processes that arise within it.

Imposed Culture. Mass Culture: It could be identified as all those cultural products found within the dispossessed classes and imposed by mass media (radio, television, press, fashion). They are culturally imposed products by hegemonic groups. They are products of the moment, which, launched within the subaltern groups, undermine their cultural heritage. Nils Castro perfectly illustrates this fact when he talks about cultural penetration and genocide.⁷

Other Features of Popular Culture: Other identifiable cultural traits within popular culture are those learned by the dominated groups who imitate the values of the hegemonic groups, the values transmitted by imposition or by institutionalized school teaching or the subaltern classes.

In summary, we should not assimilate the term and the concept of folklore to that of popular culture in general, but to traditional popular culture.⁸ On the other hand, and with a view to its use in mass media, it is essential to consider the different levels of popular culture, among which traditional culture stands out due to its significance. This must be emphasized without diminishing the contributions from peasant popular culture, proletarian culture, and other urban social sectors, which, while not traditional or folkloric, hold relevance within Latin American societies and culture.⁹

The socialization of the Latin American child fits within this context. This occurs from different angles, all converging in enculturation: the adaptation of the child to their own cultural environment.¹⁰

Latin America is, primarily, a mosaic of cultures, with different civilizing processes as noted by Darcy Ribeiro. Therefore, the self-formation, self-valuation, and self-development of the Latin American child in all its dimensions are achieved through oral tradition, which, with its positive and negative factors, forms the context of their development.¹¹

2. Notes on the Concept of Popular Culture and the Definitional Problems

In this context, popular culture is understood as all those manifestations that develop within a people and possess unique characteristics due to the historical and social processes that determine them. Popular culture is, therefore, the crucible where the most authentic values a nation has created throughout its history are preserved and nourished daily by the socio-economic reality that governs its collective life. Understood within its historical context, popular culture is dynamic par excellence: it allows people to adapt to new life situations and helps transform their surrounding reality.

As a social element, popular culture transforms according to the substantive changes of the nation to which it belongs. However, as a receptacle of ancestral socio-cultural manifestations, it allows preserving within itself the most valuable heritage of the people, thus successfully adapting to social transformations.

The changes in popular culture do not lead to the destruction or extinction of its basic traits; on the contrary, they allow preserving and enriching the unique, authentic, and genuine aspects that the people themselves wish to retain in their process of self-development. In this sense, traditional popular culture becomes an inexhaustible source of cultural identity as the root of nationality.

Popular culture, however, is not a panacea and must be analyzed critically, within a specific historical framework and considering social transformations. Understood critically and objectively, popular culture becomes the foundation upon which the cultural identity of Latin American countries rests.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that popular culture presents itself in opposition to the dominant culture of the social groups that hold the economic power of a particular society. Thus, it is an amalgamated, unsystematic expression—in Gramsci's sense—of the interests and culture of the subaltern classes.

The debate on what the science of popular traditions should be called is still ongoing among scholars of these topics, especially in Latin America, where it has recently been discussed in congresses, symposiums, and academic meetings.

Folklore or Folclor? Which term is more appropriate?

Two types of solutions have been proposed:

Firstly, there has been an effort to find a term in each country's language to replace the anglicism "folklore." That is, to find an acceptable term that fits its etymological meaning. Thus, terms such as demopsychology in France and Italy, laography in Greece, demology and demotic in Spain have emerged.

However, none of these have achieved naturalization because they fail to accurately convey the concept expressed by the Anglicism "folklore": "what the people know, what the people say and do."

The other suggested option aims to adapt the English term to the language of the respective country; in our case, to Hispanicize this term. Some attempts exist in this regard in Latin America.

Brazil was historically the first to opt for a solution of this nature when G. Viana proposed writing "folclor" instead of "folklore," an attitude warmly received, aided

by the fact that the Portuguese language lacks the letter "k." This is how it is currently used.

Following this and other examples, such as Luis Sainz Hoyos, who suggested using the word "folklor," other Latin American countries have tried to Hispanicize the term. Since the 1940s, Colombia has adapted the word "folclor," and in Argentina, the scholar Alfredo Poviña proposed "folclore" as the definitive name for the scientific study of popular traditions.

In our modest opinion, the problem at hand is not as easily resolved as it might seem at first glance, either by omitting a letter or changing syllables in the word "folklore."

There are underlying reasons that do not permit these modifications. First, one must consider the historical process that gave rise to the Anglicism that concerns us.

In 1846, the archaeologist John Williams Thoms proposed the word "folklore" in England, composed of two Anglo-Saxon terms: "folk," which means people (common classes), and "lore," knowledge of the people.

Its etymological meaning would be, then, "knowledge of the people," what the people or common, popular classes know and perform by tradition.

By modifying one or more letters of this term (e.g., "folclore," "folcior," "folklor"), the essence of the word's meaning is altered. It loses all its semantic connotation. Modified, the word has no meaning: what meaning would "folc-lor" have?

We believe that every word denoting a scientific endeavor must have a historical reason for being.

Moreover, the term "folklore," as attributed to its creator, has been fully accepted in the Spanish language. The dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy included it in its twenty-fifth edition, and the term, synonymous with popular traditions, has been fully accepted in the scientific lexicon of anthropological sciences and more recently in social sciences.

Therefore, the use of the word "folklore" has a sense and a reason for being. We believe changing letters in this scientific term is unnecessary, and we consider discussions on this matter futile, suggesting that it be used for what it means: the

people's popular knowledge, avoiding false nationalisms that attempt to adapt it to Spanish, thus deforming its historical semantic root.

Recently, specialists in popular traditions from Latin America, more concerned with content than with the semantics of the word, have reached preliminary conclusions. The technical group of specialists convened by the Organization of American States in 1979 in Cuenca, Ecuador, of which the author was part, proposed substituting the term "folklore" with the category "**Traditional Popular Culture**," a concept that has become widespread in the Latin American context, and which we have already referred to.

Thus, **Traditional Popular Culture** is understood to encompass all those manifestations that develop within a people and possess unique characteristics arising from the historical and social processes that determine them. Traditional Popular Culture is, therefore, the crucible where the most authentic values a nation has created throughout its historical evolution are preserved and nourished daily by the socio-economic reality governing its collective life. Understood within its historical context, Traditional Popular Culture is dynamic by nature; it allows peoples to successfully adapt to social transformations. The changes in Traditional Popular Culture do not entail the destruction or extinction of its basic traits; on the contrary, they allow preserving and enriching the unique, authentic, and genuine aspects that the people themselves wish to retain in their process of self-development. In this sense, Traditional Popular Culture becomes an inexhaustible source of cultural identity, as the root of nationality. Its application to various sectors of society requires that it be the foundation upon which the cultural identity of Latin American countries rests.

3. Popular Culture and Cultural Research

One of the most important aspects related to the research, promotion, and dissemination of culture lies in understanding and managing its historical character, which in recent times has been attempted to be distorted, transformed, and mechanically reduced to its ultimate expression: its concrete but abstract expression, in the sense of isolating it from its entire historical and social context.

Thus, we speak of popular art, of traditional craftsmanship, which must be modified to adapt to the new currents of tastes and fashions of capitalism, without considering the deep cosmogonic meaning these manifestations of collective creation represent for each people.

As has been pointed out repeatedly, culture has an essentially historical character that determines it; it is the socio-economic conditions that constitute its basis, so it cannot be understood in the abstract.¹²

Hence, Nils Castro's accurate criterion indicates that one cannot speak of art, man, and culture in the abstract. They simply do not exist because they are outside of history.

Culture is only concretized to the extent that it manifests as the collective practice of a historically determined social group. In this sense, culture is the sum of facts and values that society hierarchizes, selects, and transmits as collective heritage to other generations that impart their historical and social importance.

Therefore, if culture is concrete and historically and socially determined, it exists as an expression of the social forces that compose society. It is the expression of a society divided into classes, so it can be rightly said that there is a dominant or hegemonic culture and a subaltern or peripheral culture.

The interaction of both cultures, with their own dynamics, forms the cultural heritage of a people.¹³

This heritage is perceived through the works of its artists, its intellectuals, but also through anonymous creations, material or not, arising from the popular soul in the sense of Gramsci and not of Heine, and through a set of unique and authentic values that give meaning to the collective life of a society.

In this way, it can be affirmed that the cultural identity of a people is the domain in which culture is lived subjectively, in which the collectivity is understood as a subject.

Therefore, cultural identity is the creative genius of a society, the dynamic principle by which a society, relying on its past, nourished by its own vicissitudes, and selectively welcoming external contributions, continues the process, remaining faithful to itself.¹⁴

Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, former Director-General of UNESCO, stated that current societies are subjected to external socio-economic and cultural pressures that make the identity of Latin American peoples wobble. Mr. M'Bow believes that

the balance should be sought in science and technology imposed on our societies, but combined with the fundamental elements of the people's own culture.¹⁵

This interrelationship between the indigenous and the contributions of science and technology justifies the need to create a sort of symbiosis at the cultural level, which can be either creative or destructive.

It will be a destructive symbiosis if the power of science and technology is used for domination purposes, to subjugate man, to deculturate his peoples.

It will be a creative symbiosis if this power of science, technology, and culture liberates man from his material servitudes, which continue to limit his capacity to fully express himself, and if it truly allows the genuine expression of all moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values essential for man's balance and the cohesion of societies.¹⁶

The aim is not to pontificate about culture but to point out that within a global theoretical framework, the issue of traditional popular culture in all its manifestations will remain at the level of academic disquisitions, discussions, and sighs, but not scientific apprehension if not acted upon together with the bearer of this specific culture. Scientific research and technological means provide this. The era of the lone researcher who, like Prometheus, redeems culture is over. The term "researcher-cultor of culture"—to coin a new word—is one who finds the authentic roots of our peoples. Hence, only science enables us to structure, comprehend, understand, and assist in transforming the laws governing cultural processes. Like culture, the authentic creator of traditional popular culture—the musician, storyteller, craftsman, shaman, among others—are not isolated from their social and national context, nor are they abstract; they are absolutely concrete.

Any action intended for their benefit must be based on a cultural policy that prioritizes participatory research into the socio-economic reality governing the traditional culture sector.

Research into culture then becomes a priority. A great statesman once said, not without reason, that those who have not researched have no right to speak.

This means that research is the preliminary step for any program that wishes to develop in the traditional popular culture sector. Moreover, it is the basis of any structured cultural policy, not created in bureaucrats' offices but in the field, together with the bearers of this culture. For this, the cultural researcher must shed their academic toga, and research must become more than an academic exercise; it must be a tool to find solutions.

Under this conceptual framework, participatory research is a fundamental step. Here, the researcher and the researched form a single process, and both find the keys and nodes governing the world of traditional popular culture.

Only research can demonstrate that the bearer of traditional culture is indeed a creator and not merely a repeater of molds established by tradition. Moreover, only they can transform their own aesthetic patterns because they respond to a non-Western aesthetic logic.¹⁷

In the field of traditional popular culture, the researcher becomes a participant in the creative process of culture. Their role as a researcher is also intimately linked to the dissemination and application of this participatory research.

The dissemination and application of these results must be done at various levels. Pure research currently has little meaning.

The levels of dissemination are also marked by the social strata of the community:

1. At the level of the bearers of traditional popular culture themselves (artisans, storytellers, musicians, etc.), so that they can revalue their own cultural elements. They should understand—in the sense of Gramsci—the importance their work plays in forming national self-consciousness and gain perspective on their role as protagonists of a nation's culture.
2. At the level of other social groups, particularly the middle classes, so that they feel and understand—in the sense of Gramsci—that the foundations of the identity of our Latin American peoples lie in popular culture. If they do not support it and deepen their own roots, their history appears deculturated and in the limbo of peoples who repeat histories rather than forge their own.¹⁸
3. At the level of national cultural and educational organizations, so they understand that the creative process of a country develops at the base of traditional popular culture. Bureaucrats should become immersed in their roots and formulate concrete cultural and educational policies that meet the pressing needs in each country, in both rural and urban areas, and stop

planning culture and education based on preconceived models from other regions.

4. At the level of international organizations, so they understand—through repetition—that the manifestations of Latin American popular culture are not laboratories for experimentation. Our multiethnic and multinational peoples form a mosaic of individuals with their own cultural patterns as valid as those of the Western world.

New alternatives in the field of traditional popular culture research are thus projected toward two major lines of cultural policy action:

- a. The bearers of traditional culture and their own organizations that have emerged within their historical context.
- b. Educational policy, encompassing formal and non-formal education programs. In these times of scientific development, the interaction between popular culture, cultural identity, and education is crucial.

That is to say, without waiting for a catastrophe in the educational system, it is imperative to incorporate traditional popular culture into the education of our countries. This is now the top priority.

This application should not be isolated but rather integrated as part of their popular culture, which is the foundation of their national culture.

While there are many alternatives in the field of popular culture, it is true that participatory, self-managed research is the foundation for forming coherent cultural policies, which are yet to be developed and implemented in Latin America.

SOURCES:

1. On the problem of the formation of Latin American culture, varied and abundant material has been written. For the purposes of this work, we will mainly cite: Luis Brito Garcia, "La identidad de América Latina" (Caracas, Venezuela: presentation at the II Congreso de Escritores de Lengua Española, October 1981, mimeographed) pp. 1-11; Ricauté Soler, "Idea y cuestión nacional latinoamericana"; second edition (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1986), pp. 113-33; and in particular, the insightful essay by Germán Arciniegas, "Las cuatro Américas," in Lewis Hanke, "¿Tienen las Américas una historia común?" (Mexico: Editorial Diana, S.A., 1966), pp. 249-262.

2. We basically take the historical sense of culture and the cultural formation of Guatemala and Latin America. See George Foster, "Cultura y conquista" (Mexico-Xalapa: Universidad de Veracruz, 1962), pp. 53-61; and Rodolfo Quintero, "La cultura nacional y popular" (Caracas-Venezuela: Imprenta de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1977), pp. 79-101.

3. We start from the premise that culture is the cornerstone of man, allowing him to adapt to his environment in his struggle to transform nature. We take it in the broad, anthropological sense described by classical anthropology. See Melville Herskovitz, "El hombre y sus obras" (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968), pp. 56-94; Ernesto Cardenal, "La democratización de la cultura" (Managua-Nicaragua: Ministerio de Cultura, 1982), pp. 5-18; and Prem Kurpal, et al., "Problemas de la cultura y los valores culturales en el mundo contemporáneo" (Paris-France: UNESCO, 1983).

4. The problem of defining popular culture is vast and a current topic in Latin American anthropology. Much has been written on the subject in recent years, such as the works of Néstor García Canclini, "Las culturas populares en el capitalismo" (Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1982), pp. 61-89; Mario Margullis, et al., "Cultura Popular" (Mexico: Premia Editora, 1983); Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "Lo propio y lo ajeno. Una aproximación al problema del control cultural" (in Cuadernos del CIESA, 1983), pp. 183-191; Jean Casimir, "La cultura oprimida" (Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1981), pp. 140-153; Juan Martínez Borrero, "Artes y Artesanías. La perspectiva de la cultura popular," "Artesanías de América" (19): 3-12; David William Foster, "Algunos parámetros para el estudio de la cultura," "Plural" Segunda época, Vol. XV-XII 1986. (180): 33-39. Recently, see the studies by Luis F. Bate, "Cultura, clases y cuestión étnico-nacional" (Mexico: Juan Pablos Editor, 1984) pp. 51-67; Celso A. Lara Figueroa, "Bases para una polémica: ¿Folklore, folclor o cultura popular tradicional?" 1986: (41/42: 31-34) and Ofelia C. Deleon Meléndez, "Criterios fundamentales para la comprensión y valoración de la cultura popular o culturas populares," "Tradiciones de Guatemala" (27) 1987:9-18.

5. See, regarding this topic, L. M. Lombardi-Satriani, "Observaciones gramscianas sobre el folklore: De la Antropología cultural" (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1974), 15-34. Recently, the concrete existence of subaltern culture, in the sense proposed by Gramsci. See also Agustín Cueva, "El fetichismo de la hegemonía y el Imperialismo," in "Cuadernos políticos" (39): 53-54, and in particular, Nestor García Canclini, "Cultura y organización popular" "Cuadernos políticos" (39): 1984. 75-80.

6. In addition to the attribution of culture to the level of historical social development, in Latin America the ethnic component must and should be taken into account for its delimitation. See Luis F. Bate, "Op. cit.," p. 60.

7. Nils Castro, "Tareas de la cultura nacional," "La Semana de Bellas Artes" (Mexico: 27 de junio de 1979), p. 8.

8. See, among others, Celso A. Lara Figueroa, "Op. cit.," p. 34.

9. See Daniel Prieto Castillo, "Apuntes sobre comunicación y educación" (Quito-Ecuador, CIESPAL, 1985), pp. 21-40; and Hernán Rodríguez Castelo, "Claves y secretos de la literatura Infantil y juvenil" (Quito-Ecuador: Instituto Otavaleño de Antropología, 1981), pp. 13-49.

10. Darcy Ribeiro, "Las Fronteras indígenas de la civilización" (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1973), pp. 81-99.

11. Darcy Ribeiro, "El proceso civilizatorio" (Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones de la Biblioteca. Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1970), "Ibidem", p. 46.

12. See, among others, Nils Castro, "Cultura nacional y cultura socialista," in "Cultura y liberación nacional" (Colección Cultural, Serie Pensamiento Nacional), Panama, Ediciones Instituto Nacional de Cultura Impresora de la Nación, 1977, pp. 12 and passim.

13. See L.M. Lombardi Satriani, "Apropiación y destrucción de la Cultura de las clases subalternas" (Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1978), pp. 39-51; and Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "De culturas populares y política cultural" in "Culturas populares y política cultural" (Mexico: Museo de Culturas Populares, 1982), pp. 15-20.

14. See Rodolfo Stavenhagen, "La cultura popular y la creación intelectual" in "La Cultura Popular" (Mexico: Premia Editora, 1982), p. 21.

15. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "Discursos del Director General de la UNESCO" in "Conferencia Mundial sobre Políticas culturales" (Mexico, 26 de julio-6 de agosto de 1982). Boletín de Información, No. 31, 1982, pp. 7-11.

16. See Prem Kirpal, "Valores culturales, diálogo de las culturas y Cooperación internacional" in "Problemas de la cultura y los valores culturales en el mundo contemporáneo" (Paris: UNESCO, 1983), pp. 54-55.

17. See Antonio Gramsci, "Observaciones sobre folklore" in "Literatura y Vida Nacional" (Mexico: Juan Pablos Editor, 1976), p. 239.

18. L. M. Lombardi Satriani, "Op. Cit.", p. 51.