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Article:
Cole, R (2019) On the Politics of Folk Song Theory in Edwardian England. Ethnomusicology, 63 (1). pp. 19-42. ISSN: 0014-1836

https://doi.org/10.5406/ethnomusicology.63.1.0019

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the society for ethnomusicology

On the Politics of Folk Song Theory in Edwardian EnglandAuthor(s): Ross Cole

Source: *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2019), pp. 19-42

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of Society for Ethnomusicology

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/ethnomusicology.63.1.0019

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On the Politics of Folk Song Theory in Edwardian England

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Abstract. This article explores how and why a particular vision of folk song became widely popular during the early twentieth century. Focusing on Cecil J. Sharp, I show that despite severe criticism from contemporaries, his beliefs won out as the dominant paradigm for the understanding of folk music. Interrogating the politics of his theorizing, moreover, I draw out the hitherto neglected imbrications between folk revivalism and fascist ideology. Seen as dialectical tools capable of reforming citizens through the expressive contours of their racial birthright, I argue, collected songs and dances were repurposed in the service of forging a national socialist consciousness.

The study of folk music, at least in the Anglophone world, has tended to linger on the fringes of academic life. This is due in large part to enduring and at times acrimonious debates over what has been dubbed "fakelore" (Dorson 1976) or "fakesong" (Harker 1985)—disputes motivated by questions concerning authenticity, expropriation, and cultural ventriloquism.[1] Moreover, as Charles Keil pointed out in 1978, folklore has an awkward history of involvement in the upkeep of oppressive class hierarchies: the entire field, he asserted with no small degree of irony, was "a grim fairy tale" brought into being by "an act of magical naming" (263). What we take to be folklore, he affirms, is an aesthetic mirage animated by a desire to discipline or disregard what Richard Middleton (2000) has referred to as the musical "low other." However, unlike the colonialist epistemology upon which it is predicated, Keil stresses, folk seems only to have "a positive, friendly meaning" (1978:265). Dave Harker thus dismissed the concept as "intellectual rubble" in the path of a truly materialist history of working-class experience, its meaning the result of bourgeois fantasy and repeated acts of mediation (1985:xii). Ultimately, scholars such as Harker and Georgina Boyes (1993) emphasized that folk song was yet another example of

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what E. P. Thompson famously criticized as "the enormous condescension of posterity" (1963:12).

Coterminous with what we might describe as this iconoclastic approach to folk song has been an ethnomusicological attempt to recover or reconceive of the field as an anthropological endeavor concerned with the idea of tradition on a global scale. Responding to Keil's attack, the renowned folklorist Richard Dorson admitted that although some so-called folk material was indeed the commodified forgery of social elites, "the folk" still represented "a common humanity" accessible via careful ethnographic study (1978:269). Democratizing folklore to include every aspect of modern life, Dorson declared that "a member of any social class or occupational group can function as a folk performer" (267); crucially, he added, folklore research must take the form of a dialogue. It was in this spirit that Philip Bohlman published *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*—a book refusing categorical definitions of the concept in favor of a dialectical approach that highlighted "the individual folk musician as an agent of change and creativity" and accepted "folk music as the product of new cultural processes, especially modernization and urbanization" (1988:xix). Bohlman's call for a dynamic reformulation of folk music canons was taken seriously in the United States, resulting in work such as Neil Rosenberg's edited volume *Transforming Tradition* (1993), Mark Slobin's *Subcultural Sounds* (1993), and Tamara Livingston's influential article "Music Revivals: Toward a General Theory" (1999).

These iconoclastic and anthropological poles represent conflicting approaches to the study of folk song: whereas one seeks to tear down the concept and replace it with a "history from below" (see Bhattacharya 1983), the other seeks to understand folk music as the product of social movements, or imagined communities of what Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2011) has classified as "descent," "dissent," and "affinity." Despite these divergences, both nevertheless share a common left-leaning humanist politics. More recently, however, we have seen the rise of a new wave concerned with attacking these more radical, albeit familiar, positions: we might term this approach reactionary, or (to borrow a term from Bohlman) conservative. Known for holding controversial right-wing opinions—condemning, for example, suffragette feminists, whom he characterizes as "failed terrorists" (2005:397)—C. J. Bearman spearheaded this cause. Lamenting what he regards as a "Marxist orthodoxy" beholden to Gramscian theory and the invention of tradition (2000:751), Bearman reexamined the statistics of Britain's foremost collector, Cecil Sharp.[2] What emerges is that Sharp collected in several urban centers and that a number of his best sources were by no means working class. "At the highest level," Bearman notes, "this group shaded into the local elite" (763). Instead of an approach marred by "gender and class warfare," he asserts, we must in consequence "return to the view of

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folk music as an art form and national treasury, the property not of a class but of the English people" (775). This argument is echoed by David Gregory, who insists that the folk were not imagined but "were real, [and] so were their songs" (2009:26).

The problems with such an approach are obvious, ranging from its disregard of representation and unreconstructed nationalism to its historical positivism and unconcealed contempt for the study of class, race, and gender. Looking beyond these difficulties, moreover, Bearman's conclusion is not the only one that can be drawn from his evidence. Although establishing that previous work warrants some empirical revision, Bearman's argument that folk songs cannot be aligned straightforwardly with class status ironically serves in support of the very position he wishes to discredit: the crucial point overlooked by conservatives is that in spite of the relatively diverse social milieu that Sharp collected from, the discourse of folk song circulating at the turn of the twentieth century transformed the songs they sang into the products of an unlettered, homogeneous, and bucolic "folk." These singers, in other words, were not just sources to be collected from but became subsumed within a speculative theory of folk song that bore little relation to their cultural practice. More worryingly, a revisionist focus on the minutiae of collecting has worked to preclude serious consideration of the political motivations underlying such gestures and the ways in which more skeptical contemporaries reacted to folk song theory.

In what follows I explore how and why a particular vision of folk song became widely popular in Britain and the United States during the early twentieth century. Focusing on Sharp's writings, I show that despite severe criticism from contemporaries, his beliefs won out as the dominant paradigm for the understanding of folk music. Building on work by John Francmanis (2002), I suggest that Sharp, therefore, acted as a "gatekeeper" to the idea and content of folk song both during the Edwardian era and beyond. Drawn from communication studies, gatekeeping offers a useful way to extend Harker's notion of mediation by introducing a dynamic model comprising actions that include selection, classification, arrangement, framing, addition, deletion, integration, and disregard of material (Barzilai-Nahon 2008). Gatekeepers such as Sharp, as Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos note, "interpret the messages [they receive], resolve ambiguities, make educated guesses about things they have not observed directly, and form inferences about relationships" (2009:38). Like all gatekeepers, furthermore, Sharp was indebted to the intellectual environment in which he worked—a framework defined by the distinctive confluence of extreme nationalism, social Darwinism, and Fabian socialism. Tracing the broader resonance of this project, I draw out the hitherto neglected imbrications between Sharp's ideas and fascist ideology. Folk song, I claim, is undeniably rooted in what the Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell (2010) has termed the "anti-Enlightenment

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tradition." Ironically, we thus find fascist thinking latent at the heart of what has since become a stronghold of leftist protest movements advocating democracy, rights, and liberation.

The Natural Musical Idiom of a National Will

In June 1905 a note appeared in the *Musical Times* reporting that London's Folk-Song Society "seems to have entered upon a new lease of life" under its new honorary secretary, Lucy Broadwood; it went on to state that a recently issued volume of the society's *Journal* contained a significant "harvest" contributed by that "enthusiastic collector" Cecil J. Sharp (Anon. 1905b:383).[3] Founded in 1898, the society had indeed been suffering from a substantial decrease in revenue and a general inertia owing to the deteriorating health of the honorary secretary, Kate Lee (Keel 1948). The turning point had come in 1904: an annual report noted that several new members had been elected and that Sharp, "who has lately collected some hundreds of songs in Somersetshire and North Devon, joined our Committee" (Anon. 1905a:ix). Sharp had neither participated in the society's foundation nor shown any public interest in the subject during the 1890s. Educated at Cambridge—where he read mathematics—he had become principal of the Hampstead Conservatoire of Music and was busy carving out a career in the capital as an educator and choral conductor. In 1902 he published a miscellany entitled *A Book of British Song for Home and School*, prompting one reviewer to comment on its "large sprinkling of folk-songs" and remark in astonishment that "although this collection of school songs is designated 'British', no fewer than sixty-six of the seventy-eight ditties contained herein are English" (Anon. 1903). Indeed, from the outset Sharp appeared to be set on the promulgation not only of folk song in wider society but of folk song as a means to cultivate a specifically English identity utilizing a handful of singers from "three small districts" as indicators of the South West, the South West as a microcosm of England, and England as a synecdoche for Britain (Sharp 1905:1). It would be Sharp, more than any other collector, who would come to dominate folk song discourse in the new century, initiating a paradigm shift away from patient antiquarianism toward resolute doctrine, public dissemination, English nationalism, pedagogy, and deliberate cultural intervention.

Although he aimed for a "scientific" approach when publishing material in the society's *Journal*—printing (as Francis James Child had done) "with each ballad all the variants and different versions of it," along with each singer's name and location and the date of collection (1905:1)—Sharp began to construct an elaborate theory of folk song that not only contradicted this meticulous collation of data but also served to erase the presence, experience, and voices of individual singers. As reported in the *Musical Times*, he outlined this Darwinian model of

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folk song origin, variation, and selection during an address to the Tonic Sol-fa Association in December 1906: "The lecturer boldly applies the doctrines of evolution to explain the adoption of final forms (if there are any). He thinks that many of the existing tunes began with mere inflection, and that gradually, in the course of generations, they have assumed their existing form. So we have geometrical increase, constant variation, struggles for existence, and survival of the fittest—the communally made tune, embodying the rhythmic and tonal likings of the race and district" (Anon. 1906c:43).

What set Sharp apart from previous collectors was not only this framework but the extent to which he wished to see such material restored to the nation as a whole. Whereas the Folk-Song Society "is doing its best to collect the ballad before it dies," he stressed, "it remains for others to restore it, and place the ballad in the mouths of the people" (Anon. 1904:190). Within this scheme, however, the folk themselves appeared merely as specters, usurped by revivalists and rendered silent. Although showing "upon the lantern screen a number of photographs of the old singers who contributed to his collection," Sharp chose to illustrate his talk with performances featuring himself on piano and the singer Mattie Kay (Anon. 1906a:10).

Vociferously rebutting anyone who claimed that England had no pleasing or authentic songs with proof from his recent fieldwork, Sharp's voice became a familiar point of reference in public debates over folk song in the press.[4] Such ideas were elaborated at length in his 1907 monograph, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*—a book, he states, the "main thesis" of which is "the evolutionary origin of the folk-song" (Sharp 1907a:x). Folk song and popular song, he emphasizes, are to the expert "two distinct species of music" differing "not in degree but in kind"—one the result of cultivated enterprise, the other the result of an unconscious collective process (x). Establishing a global spectrum of subalterns, such instinct united "ancient" music with "peasant" singers and "the natives of New Guinea, China, Java, Sumatra, and other Eastern nations" (44)—their modes, Sharp proposes, "may be called *natural* scales" (1908:140). Likewise, the English folk were not simply "illiterate" but entirely uneducated people "whose mental development has been due . . . solely to environment" and who had thus "escaped the infection of modern ideas" (Sharp 1907a:3–4). What Sharp was interested in, consequently, was a kind of prosopopoeia in which folk song was the expression not of heterogeneous human civilization but of nature itself. Despite admitting that pages of his workbooks were "filled with scraps of imperfectly remembered broadside versions" and sometimes even an entire ballad (1905:2–3), Sharp refused to engage with evidence that might have rendered this thesis incorrect. "To search for the originals of folk-songs amongst the printed music of olden days," he avowed, was a "mere waste of time" (Sharp 1907a:8).

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Sharp was thus far less concerned with documenting vernacular culture on its own terms than with "unsealing the lips" of singers in order to induce them, as he writes, "to unlock their treasures at our bidding" (1907b:16)—ideally culminating in what one critic poignantly described as "transference of the songs and dances from one class to the other" (Anon. 1910b:596). Indeed, Sharp openly acknowledges that his principal goal is not ethnography but rather to change the "pessimistic attitude towards the musical prospects of our country" (1907a:127). As "the natural musical idiom of a national will" (130), he believed, salvaged folk songs could provide a rebuttal both to foreign musical dominance and to unwelcome internationalism arising from Britain's history as the world's preeminent colonial power:

> Our system of education is, at present, too cosmopolitan; it is calculated to produce citizens of the world rather than Englishmen. And it is Englishmen, English citizens, that we want. How can this be remedied? By taking care, I would suggest, that every child born of English parents is, in its earliest years, placed in possession of all those things which are the distinctive products of its race . . . If every child be placed in possession of all these race-products, he will know and understand his country and his countrymen far better than he does at present; and knowing and understanding them he will love them the more, realize that he is united to them by the subtle bond of blood and kinship, and become, in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen, and a truer patriot. (135–36)

Published (as he was forced to concede) only "after extensive alteration or excision" (102), folk songs accordingly placed "in the hands of the patriot, as well as of the educationalist, an instrument of great value" (136). Flooded with such material, Sharp imagines, the English streets would become "a pleasanter place for those who have sensitive ears" while "civilizing the masses" by displacing their "vulgar music" (137). The discovery of these traditions, he claims, was "destined to create a revolution in the musical taste of this country" comparable to that—demonstrated by the verse of William Wordsworth—following in the wake of Bishop Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (127). Sharp viewed a folk revival, in short, as an instrument of mass social reform grounded in Romantic nationalism.

The Folk Song Fallacy

Such a scheme, we should remember, bore scant relation to the realities of rural working-class experience. Indeed, it is productive to set Sharp's imaginative vision of a homogeneous, hermetic, and unlettered peasantry in counterpoint with surviving sources.[5] One of the few texts to discuss vernacular song culture in the countryside during this period is Fred Kitchen's 1940 *Brother to the Ox: The Autobiography of a Farm Labourer*. Born in Edwinstowe, Nottinghamshire,

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in 1890, Kitchen moved with his family to Yorkshire, where they lived as tenant farmers on an aristocratic estate. After the death of his first wife and a number of different jobs (including work as a cowman, miner, and railway navvy), Kitchen enrolled in evening classes at the Workers' Educational Association, where he began writing *Brother to the Ox*, a book that would go on to win a Foyles literary prize (Palmer 2004). In marked contrast to Sharp's ideal, Kitchen recalls that due to early encouragement from a schoolmistress and chaplain he had "always been fond of poetry, and could recite off-hand much of Burns, Keats, Shelly's *Skylark*, and many of the great poets"; he had also read "most of George Eliot's works, several Dickens, Thackery's *Vanity Fair*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" ([1940] 1983:11, 151).

Kitchen recounts evenings spent with other farm laborers in the stables "until nine o'clock, when we had a basin of bread-and-milk, and so to bed":

> Usually one of them would bring a melodeon, and he was considered a poor gawk who couldn't knock a tune out of a mouth-organ or give a song to pass away the evening. We had rare times in the "fotherham," seated on the corn-bin or on a truss of hay. Tom fra' Bennett's would strike off with, "Oh, never go into a sentry-box, to be wrapt in a soldier's cloak," while someone played away on the melodeon. He was a merry sort of lad, was Tom, and his songs always had a spicy flavour. Harry Bates, Farmer Wood's man, always sang sentimental ballads. Harry was a Lincolnshire chap, and their singing, I always noticed, was of a more serious vein than the rollicking Yorkies. . . . He knew no end of good songs—as did most of the farm lads—but his were mostly about "soldiers sighing for their native land," and "heart-broken lovers," and that sort of stuff, so that as a rule we liked to get Tom singing first. They were all good singers, and good musicians too, and it must not be supposed, because they were farm men and lads, they were just caterwauling. (59–60)

These gatherings would typically involve songs such as "Heart of Oak" (composed in the eighteenth century by William Boyce and David Garrick), broadside ballads such as "The Sentry Box," and sentimental music hall material such as "The Volunteer Organist" (published by Wm. B. Glenroy and Henry Lamb).[6] These songs do not fit Sharp's Darwinian theory but instead attest to a long history of popular commercial print.[7] Although Kitchen came to distinguish the "latest pantomime songs" from what he described as the "meat and poetry of our old songs," the concept of folk song never figures in his worldview (149). In fact, Kitchen is at pains to point out that pastoral visions tended to be highly selective: although "artists have drawn some pleasing pictures of the shepherd leading his flock on the grassy uplands, or gazing pensively at a setting sun," he remarks, there are somewhat fewer portraits of the rough, undignified, and frequently grueling aspects of rural life (125).

Sharp's ideas, moreover, were not readily accepted among his fellow folk song devotees. The Folk-Song Society's own advice, for example, was that collectors

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should ask a singer "whether he possesses, or knows of anyone who possesses, old song-books or ballad-sheets, as these (more especially the latter) are most valuable in connection with the subject of Folk-songs" (Anon. 1908:149). Indeed, Broadwood had instructed collectors to go "back, through the broadsides of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the earliest black-letter ballad-sheets in our museums, and you will find, on *these*, words still sung *to-day*" (1904–5:90). Conversant with such material and thoroughly unmoved by Sharp's theorizing, the antiquarian Frank Kidson had published a review of *English Folk-Song* voicing restrained concern over the author's "zealous devotion" to his subject and conclusions that "bear upon the face of them an assured conviction as to their soundness" (1908:23). Kidson probed Sharp's evolutionary hypothesis, arguing that "there remain many puzzling things about folk-song—or rather folk-melody—which are not solved by such obvious reasoning" (1908:23). More significantly still, Kidson raised the issue that no satisfactory demarcation of folk song had ever been advanced.

The psychologist C. S. Myers likewise protested Sharp's definition, given that it seemed to imply that all music "of the untrained mind" was folk song, whereas Sharp himself had stated that this was not the case (1909:98). Myers felt it necessary to draw attention to several flaws and a passage that was "demonstrably inaccurate" (99). J. A. Fuller Maitland's review of what he dubbed Sharp's "professedly scientific treatise" in the *Times Literary Supplement* was no less unflattering, dryly recommending that, given his "comparatively late advent into the ranks of the collectors," the subtitle be amended to "Some Beginnings" (1908:26). The model of individual creation followed by communal selection specified in the book, he noticed, was in fact much less radical than the "strange theory" of collective authorship that Sharp liked to advance "in the heat of controversy" (1908:26). Musing on why the versions of songs Sharp considered most authoritative happened to be his own discoveries, Fuller Maitland concludes by noting that although Sharp deserved credit for his eagerness, "he might well leave to others the work of analysing the treasures he finds" (1908:26).[8]

The most acerbic critique of Sharp and the folk song movement as a whole, however, came from the pen of celebrated critic Ernest Newman. A short article in the *Observer* in May 1912 commented that Newman had been "discoursing eloquently on the many fallacies connected with the aims and claims of folk-song partisans": appearing in the *English Review*, his arguments, it noted, "are strong and, if you are not sentimental on the subject, entirely conclusive" (Anon. 1912a:5). "The" Englishman, Newman declares, is "a fiction": in consequence, Sharp's ideas were crude, superficial, and built upon a wholly untenable foundation (1912a:266). Unearthing abundant contradictions in Sharp's work, Newman reasoned that "the whole theory of 'racial characteristics' in music is flawed to the very centre," as nations could never be "summed up in this style

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under a single simple formula" (257–58). Challenging these "facile and foolish generalisations," he announces:

> The supposed fixity of type within a given territory is a myth, there being all possible variations of it observable when we study it in detail. Still less can we predicate any such fixity of type among the nations of Western Europe, or such starkness of type-contrast between one nation as a whole and another. . . . The theory that even in a simple community—to say nothing of complex communities like ours—there is any one type of mind or body that can claim to be "the" national type is absurd. (266–67)

Citing Kidson's work, furthermore, Newman notes that "patient research proves the foreign *provenance* of many a melody that has always been accepted as unquestionably 'national'" (264).[9] Suggesting that songs were worsened in their passage through time rather than improved, he demanded to know which were the results of "communal selection" when Sharp acknowledged that individual singers always performed the same material differently. Warning against an idealization of the past and a fetishization of "sheer musical incompetence," Newman was primarily objecting to what he felt was a disconcerting form of colonialist déjà vu—branding folk song as merely "a revival of the eighteenth-century theory of the divine rightness of the noble savage and the corruption of civilization" (261, 263).[10]

Sharp thought Newman's "serious and reasoned attack" provocative enough to warrant an extended reply in the same periodical two months later (1912b:542). His rebuttal amounted to a defense of the "national characteristic" that Newman had so conscientiously criticized. "Although we cannot define it," Sharp explains, we "recognise it when we come across it" (543). This essence was the wellspring of culture "found in its purest, crudest, and least diluted form" in traditional song: "Just as the mixture is strongest at the bottom of the bottle, so are the peculiar characteristics of a nation concentrated in its humblest class. This is natural enough; because the peasantry, as a class, is, of all the others, the most homogeneous and the least affected by alien and outside influences. Unlettered and untravelled, the peasant has had no opportunity of producing an imitative, sophisticated art. What art he does create must of necessity be spontaneous, natural, and un-selfconscious" (545). Comparing this "primitive" creation of "uncultivated minds" to the splendor of "all elemental things, the trees, clouds, hills, and rivers," Sharp urged Newman to "silence his analytical mind" and try instead "to *feel* the beauty of the folk-song" (545–46).

Newman was not impressed. In a final rejoinder, he notes that Sharp "simply repeats the old fallacies . . . with the addition of one or two new ones. He imagines he has proved things when he has merely said them, and that the arguments against a theorem can be refuted by a bold reassertion of it" (1912b:66). Attempting to shift focus from these disconcerting intellectual confrontations,

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Sharp had concluded that the worth of English folk song would ultimately not be decided by figures such as Newman; instead, "the verdict," he wrote, "rests with the public" (1912b:550).

A New Orthodoxy

Herein lies the reason why Sharp would become perhaps the most authoritative folk song gatekeeper of the twentieth century. The way Sharp achieved this status was threefold: first, the sheer scale of his collecting efforts across the south of England; second, his populist lecturing and accessible publications; and third, his alignment of these undertakings with contemporaneous educational policy, including the establishment of a countrywide network of instructors, graded vacation schools, rules, and adjudicated competitions.[11] An official report by the Board of Education on state elementary schools presented to the houses of Parliament in 1905, for example, enthusiastically encouraged the use of "national or folk-songs," as they satisfied criteria such as the teaching of singing, the mother tongue, emotional expression, and history to infants (70). In collaboration with the priest and antiquarian Sabine Baring-Gould, Sharp responded by publishing a book of arrangements the following year—a collection the editors stated was explicitly "made to meet the requirements of the Board of Education" (1906:iv). Whereas the board's report recommended that children should sing songs from different countries "to convey an impression . . . of the characteristic traditions of other races" (Board of Education 1905:71), Baring-Gould and Sharp intended their edition of songs to help English children acquire "that which is their very own" in preference to what they referred to as "foreign models" (1906:iii). A review in the *Musical Standard* observed that as this book was "tastefully got up and extremely cheap," there was "little doubt that it will achieve the popularity it deserves" (G.C. 1906:93).

Unlike prior folk song devotees, Sharp became increasingly dictatorial, taking it upon himself to represent qualified expertise over and above the modest utterances of the Folk-Song Society, a body lacking clear directorship and corporate sway, more concerned with forging ties to scholarly establishments such as the Library of Congress and the Bodleian. With his preeminence and self-professed competence, in Michel de Certeau's words, thus "transmuted into social authority" (1984:7), Sharp secured his conceptualization of folk song and his repertoire over that of other collectors. The music critic Percy Scholes argued in his obituary that although Broadwood, Kidson, Fuller Maitland, Vaughan Williams, and others had produced admirable work, Sharp "left them all far behind in one activity": the "re-popularisation of English folk-song and folk-dance" (1924:10). Scholes continued: "He published enormously, and published in practical form, providing cheap editions of songs, with simple accompaniments,

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such as were within the financial means and artistic resources of the elementary school. He founded the English Folk Dance Society, and trained and sent out teachers hall-marked by himself. I remember during the war, at Havre, being made to dance vigorously immediately after dinner by a party of soldiers taught by an instructress sent out by the society. This brought home to me the extent of Sharp's success" (1924:10). In other words, Sharp consciously positioned himself as a gatekeeper to the materials he gathered, absorbing them into a totalizing operation—defining, disseminating, and institutionalizing a canon of materials, practices, and theories that resonated with the public imagination. Lying in wait "like a hunter's trap" (1984:61), Certeau notes, such models force their objects of investigation to speak and, over time, "tend to become an imperialism and to define a new orthodoxy" (1988:137).

Indeed, Sharp achieved momentous success in spite of his critics, as Kidson noted in 1915: "The part that Mr Cecil Sharp has taken in the advancement of folk-song is well known. . . . [H]is vigorous methods of bringing the subject before the public have caused 'folk-song' to become a household word" (Kidson and Neal 1915:47). In Broadwood's personal view, Sharp had made the ungentlemanly move of becoming a professional collector, overstepping former pioneers in the field. In a letter to her sister Bertha, she writes, "He puffed and boomed and shoved and ousted and used the Press to advertise himself." Crowning himself "King of the whole movement," she protests, he "was by the general ignorant public taken at his own valuation" (1924). An article in the *Musical Times* noted that "no one has been more distinguished than Mr. Cecil Sharp" in the revival of songs and dances (Anon. 1912b:639), while another article from the same year portrayed him as "the greatest authority on both these branches of folk-lore" (McN. 1912:602). Looking back on the movement five years after Sharp's death, Robert Hull observed with regret that the "label 'folk-song' is regarded as a talisman capable of sustaining any attack"; such music, he suggested, has "been exalted to a position which it was never intended to occupy" (1929:712).

Sharp's ideas also found their way across the Atlantic during this period, catalyzed by involvement in Harley Granville-Barker's celebrated production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; extensive lecturing, instruction, and adjudication; and collecting trips to the Appalachian Mountains (figure 1; see Sharp and Campbell 1917). His companion, Maud Karpeles, noted that in this region Sharp encountered the "England of his dreams," a hermetic utopia of shared heritage where people existed in a state of "arrested degeneration" due to their supposed isolation from modernity (2008:140, 146–47).[12] From unpublished diaries, it becomes clear why Sharp focused his collecting efforts on these white inhabitants: he not only held openly racist opinions about African Americans (often employing the term "nigger") but also was deeply insensitive to the history of slavery, disenfranchisement, and white supremacy. Writing on 8 December

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1918 regarding a conversation with John M. Glenn of the philanthropic Russell Sage Foundation, Sharp remarks with indignation that Glenn "resented my dubbing the negroes as of a lower race & maintained it was a mere lack of education etc!" (342). Earlier that year, he commented in impossibly poor taste that the town where he was staying in North Carolina was "stuffed full with negroes," pondering "whether they are attracted to this tobacco industry by their similarity in colour" (234). The only folk worthy of the name and thus of conservation in Sharp's view were white: black music, it seems, was either unpleasantly "distracting" (122) or of no concern. Charles Peabody nevertheless praised Sharp's "persevering effort" in collecting "folk-dances and melodies of very ancient origin," declaring that "he has the acumen of the scholar in publication, and the enthusiasm of the teacher in instruction" (1915:316). Likewise, Evelyn Wells reminisced about the "new world [Sharp's collecting] opened out for us" and the "cultural roots of America which he laid bare," recalling "the spread of enthusiasm through the country, as the contagion caught on in Buffalo, in Pittsburgh, in Cincinnati and St. Louis and Chicago and Toronto, to say nothing of New York and Boston" (1959:182–84).[13]

Sharp's theories would eventually find their way into the disciplinary heart of folklore study as anonymous axioms. At the seventh conference of the International Folk Music Council in 1954, a plenary session was convened to discuss

Figure 1. Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles collecting songs from Lucindy Pratt in Hindman, Knott County, Kentucky, 1916. Heritage Image Partnership Ltd. / Alamy Stock Photo. Reproduced with permission.

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a delineation of the council's remit proposed by Karpeles. A rubric was then drafted and put to a vote, with the result that "the Congress agreed that this definition be accepted":

> Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives. The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community. The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character. (Anon. 1955:23)

The legacy Sharp bequeathed to folk music's discursive formation is emblazoned throughout: it is the unwritten survival of a purely oral tradition; it results from an evolutionary process of variation and selection; and it exists within the confines of a collective milieu dislocated from both mass culture and high art.

Sharp's authority, moreover, was felt in the statement on education passed unanimously during the same congress: "Folk music (which includes dance as well as song) is the basis upon which should rest the musical education of the ordinary citizen" (Anon. 1955:23). Crucially, this resolution affirmed that "the knowledge of experts should be utilised in the selection of material in the training of teachers and in the control of the diffusion of folk music by popular methods such as radio, television, records, films and public performances" (23). Predicated on a chain of gatekeeping decisions, the process necessary for the transmutation of vernacular musicking into the disciplinary object "folk music" could not have been more clearly or concisely delineated. Involving the selection, disregard, censorship, classification, rearrangement, and reification of musical material, this process also relied upon the elucidation of folk song within a particular topography of thought.

Cecil Sharp and Fascism

So what lay behind Sharp's desire to disseminate English folk song, and what would happen if we reread his revivalist project in a political light? On the one hand, Sharp was providing "scientific" corroboration for the late Victorian and Edwardian vogue for evocations of an Arcadian past, crystallizing a prevailing mood of pastoral nostalgia manifest in the Arts and Crafts movement, conservationism, the garden city movement, the Merrie England Society, and the Peasant Arts Society (of which he was an active member). Social life, as one

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reviewer put it, had "undergone a reconstruction" still not complete: "Just as the invention of gunpowder blew an old order of things to the winds, so the introduction of machinery and rapid locomotion have brought in a new epoch" (Anon. 1907b:801). Inspired by Sharp's work, the poet John Masefield eulogized what he described as "the old beautiful peasant life from which they came, the old orderly homely life, of which [folk songs] were the flower" (1905:302). For an era negotiating the dawn of a new century and with it new technologies, the rise of mass culture, the expansion of capital, and a globe poised on the brink of conflict, such ideas sounded a reassuring note of stability while simultaneously revealing a world divided by race, nation, and Empire. Myers noted, for example, that "it was exceedingly interesting for one who has worked at the music of savage peoples to find many points of resemblance between them and the peasant folk-singers of our own country" (1909:99). Indeed, folk song theory sutured "peasant" to "primitive" as twin incarnations of organic and thus potentially restorative musical expression. Symptoms of an attempt to halt the advancement of modernity, the material Sharp collected thus became the spur to a revitalization of English identity and a bulwark against the "evil days" of music hall entertainment with its "debased art" of "cake-walks and skirt-dances" (1912a:164). Revived songs and the broader epistemology of folk music, on the other hand, attest to a disquieting political tradition that has passed almost entirely without notice.

On the surface, Sharp's political commitments may appear contradictory: we know, for example, that he was a member of the conservative and imperialistic Navy League and a committed socialist who joined the Fabian Society in 1900; yet, as Karpeles notes, he "was at no time a keen Party man" (2008:19). Founded in London in 1884, the Fabian Society was an influential gathering of middle-class intellectuals aimed "at the re-organisation of Society by the emancipation of Land and industrial Capital from individuals and class ownership, and the vesting of them in the community for the general benefit" (Anon. 1891:3).[14] Disseminated through a vast number of statistical and didactic "tracts," the society's reformist principles revolved around three desires: to see the establishment of an efficient centralized state, to replace individualism with collectivism, and to work toward the "cessation of class distinctions" (Anon. 1890a:16). Greater economic equality was not to be achieved through a Marxist uprising or anarchism, however, but via gradualist and democratic means utilizing established systems of government. The Fabians' overriding objection was that wealth and the means of production had been kept "in the hands of a class instead of in the hands of the nation as a whole" (Anon. 1890b:3).

Diversity of political opinion of course existed, and Sharp did not support all aspects of Fabianism. In contrast to their manifesto's commitment to gender equality (Anon. 1884), for example, he was not supportive of women's suffrage

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(Karpeles 2008:20). Indeed, Sharp seems to have been less keen on achieving political equality for all members of society than on a spiritual call to national unity. Karpeles notes that Sharp "did not regard democracy as a fetish to be unreservedly worshipped" and feared (writing in a letter to his son Charles from the United States in 1918) that "the evils of democracy" might bring about rule "by a tyrannous majority" (19). Although he dreaded the masses, however, Sharp praised the notion of state collectivism in the manner articulated by Fabian Christian socialists. In 1897, for instance, the Reverend John Clifford had proposed that "a new ideal of life and labor . . . is most urgently needed"; reacting to a century of "hard individualism" that had bred "caste feelings," hollowness, indolence, contempt, and serfdom, he extolled "the unity of English life . . . an ideal that is the *soul* at once of Collectivism and of the revelation of the brotherhood of man in Jesus Christ" (10–11). Aligned with his identity as a self-styled "Conservative Socialist" (Karpeles 2008:19), Sharp's membership in the patriotic Navy League begins to make sense from this perspective. Encompassing a significant number of Liberals despite its right-wing tenor, this popular lobbying group saw itself as a nonpartisan platform dedicated to securing British military supremacy at sea in the decades leading up to the Great War—a movement, Matthew Johnson argues, "based on a conception of naval power not simply as a legitimate arm of national defense but as the basis of national might and prestige" (2011:140).

In fact, Sharp's simultaneous support for nonrevolutionary, authoritarian socialism and militant, organic nationalism in conjunction with his antipathy toward liberal democracy and fascination with social Darwinism is by no means inconsistent. In a powerful series of books including *Neither Right nor Left* (1986), *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (1994), and, more recently, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (2010), Zeev Sternhell has persuasively argued that such a confluence must be seen not merely as the precursor to fascist movements but rather as the ideological nexus in which fascism was constituted as an alternative political culture. Our unwillingness to see fascism as an integral element of European history belonging to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he stresses, has arisen from the exigencies of Cold War historiography, strategic amnesia, and a desire to treat the 1940s as an aberration rather than the extension of long-standing habits of political thought. Fascism, Sternhell establishes, was "a latent ideology" grounded in a revision of Marxism (1986:xviii). "Before it became a political force," he notes, it was "a cultural phenomenon" (Sternhell 1994:3). Coalescing at the fin de siècle, this framework involved the synthesis of new forms of virile nationalism with a modified socialism no longer beholden to proletarian revolt. The result was a political outlook revolving around a strong nation-state; a glorification of organic communality; warfare; a denigration of liberal democracy; and a

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rejection of individualism, philosophical materialism, and capitalism (but not of private property or profit). Behind these interlaced factors was the desire to unify and mobilize all classes of society through the idea of the nation viewed as a racial community with sacred ties to the soil.

Sharp's views are undeniably bound up with and indebted to these complex intellectual currents that would later give rise to fascist regimes. Indeed, Sharp was familiar with the political landscape in both Europe and the United States: his diaries are full of references to "long arguments" with friends and acquaintances about democracy and the war. Two particularly telling passages from early 1918 reveal how a socialist at the time could simultaneously reject a key facet of Marxism:

> This is going to be a very critical year for the whole world and almost anything may happen. My constant fear is that the war will not reach a definite conclusion with a signed treaty of peace as wars in the past have done, but that it will gradually assume a general revolution in this and any belligerent country and perhaps neutral countries as well. War, weariness [?], and general dislike to return to the unfair almost savage economic conditions which existed in pre-war days will very likely lead to something of this kind—a world revolution following up on a world-war. Well, we shall see!! (1)

> I have a long argument—political. . . . Take the conservative view in politics, or rather the value of a conservative party to act as a drag, and point to Russia as a hideous example of a nation which lacks one. (64)

As a subscribing reader of the *New Statesman*, in other words, Sharp abhorred the "savage" economic conditions of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras; yet he denigrated the Bolsheviks' revolutionary tactics. This ostensibly "bizarre mixture of radical and reactionary elements" (Harker 1985:175), however, was not incongruous; instead, it pointed toward a new kind of revolutionary ambition.

Fascism, as Sternhell emphasizes, aimed for "a revolution of the spirit" (1986:272). Its advocates sought "to lay the foundation of a new civilization, a communal, anti-individualist civilization that alone would be capable of perpetuating the existence of a human collectivity in which all layers and classes of society are perfectly integrated." The nation was to take on this stabilizing role in the modern world, "a nation that boasted a moral unity that liberalism and Marxism—both productive of factionalism and discord—could never provide" (27). Offering new relationships "between man and nature" (303), this prevailing ideology of rejection and renewal demanded "new forms of social organization and cultural expression" (271). It is in this light that Sharp's work and the broader project of folk song and dance revivalism in England must be seen. Through Sharp's theories, the songs and dances he collected became anonymous tokens of organic collectivity, the natural emanation of the nation's soul over and above the individualist products of an unchecked capitalist economy. Indeed, this

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ideology explains the curious discrepancy between folkloric theory and collecting praxis: songs and dances were envisioned as dialectical tools capable of forging new relations of kinship between people and nature, as well as between citizens and classes, unifying the nation as a tribe of patriots restored to the expressive contours of their birthright and the dead.

It was no accident, therefore, that the Folk Dance Society wished to instruct British soldiers during the Great War. As Sternhell notes, fascist ideology was animated by the masculine virtues "of heroism, energy, alertness, a sense of duty, a willingness to sacrifice, and an acceptance of the idea of the pre-eminence of the community over the individuals who compose it" (1986:271).[15] Such ideas were not lost on the revivalist Rolf Gardiner, who was openly sympathetic to fascism (see Jefferies and Tyldesley 2011). Our tendency to treat such figures as eccentrics or exceptions is symptomatic of the historical revisionism Sternhell identifies: folk song is thereby able to retain its politically innocuous associations with nostalgia and cultural heritage.

To be sure, I am proposing not that Sharp be branded a fascist but that his ideas have a striking resemblance to many Continental contemporaries and thus bear witness to what Sternhell describes as the "great ideological laboratory of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth" that laid the groundwork for the European catastrophe (2010:16). This moment represented the critical juncture in a much longer philosophical lineage that he has dubbed the "anti-Enlightenment tradition." The radical nationalism of the early twentieth century, Sternhell proposes, was "a natural result of the emphasis placed on ethnic, historical, and cultural specificity in the face of the universal values and concepts of the humanism of the Enlightenment" (415).[16] If fascist movements represent the "extreme" form of this tradition (441), then folk song was a less pernicious expression nonetheless predicated on the very same system of thought. Tracing this history back to Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Edmund Burke, Sternhell proposes that a revolt against Enlightenment ideals exemplified by Kant and the French Revolution presents us not with a counterrevolution but with a "different modernity" built upon divisions of language, custom, and history (8). This alternate modernity "saw religion as an essential foundation of society," called upon the state "to regulate social relationships," embraced cultural relativism, and "deplored the disappearance of the spiritual harmony . . . of medieval life": the antidote was a restoration of this "lost unity" (8). Given its underlying affinity with the concept of *Volkslied*, the roots of Sharp's epistemology are not hard to detect.[17]

Sharp's work thus echoes what Raymond Williams characterizes as a history of "idealist retrospect" in Britain—a way of measuring change and resisting capitalist injustice nevertheless in danger of reinforcing undemocratic hierarchies "in the name of blood and soil" (1973:35–36). Such thinking is

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particularly evident in Sharp's sensuous ruralism; anti-intellectualism (manifest in his exchange with Newman); elevation of the peasantry; and attempts to tie national identity to the "social life of the English village," in which folk material was "part and parcel of a great tradition that stretches back into the mists of the past in one long, unbroken chain," now under threat (1907a:viii). The nation's salvation, in this view, lay in what Robert Paxton describes as a "vast collective enterprise": "the warmth of belonging to a race now fully aware of its identity, historic destiny, and power" (2005:17).[18] It would therefore be counterproductive at best to suggest that folkloric notions of racial collectivity, purity of origin, and cultural pessimism, combined with Sharp's vociferous rejection of cosmopolitan internationalism and desire to reenergize a unified, tribal nation through the idea of a "fatherland" (1912b:544), are distinct from the history of European fascism. Edwardian folk revivalism and the heroic revivification of an imagined racial community, in short, are inseparable. Driven by this political ideology, Sharp's gatekeeping actions functioned to erase the very traditions he was safeguarding, transforming vernacular practices into reproducible artifacts untethered from their original histories of meaning and use and repurposed for the sake of forging a new national socialist consciousness.

Given his political sympathies, it is perhaps unsurprising that Sharp has proved attractive to scholars on the reactionary end of the spectrum. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which his ideas—deeply conditioned by the history of anti-Enlightenment thinking, extreme nationalism, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia—have managed to circulate without having their political meanings fully scrutinized, notwithstanding the iconoclastic writers mentioned earlier. In this sense, Sharp has been supremely successful: his ideas reverberate silently and all the more powerfully within objects and cultural practices that, for many people, exist simply as innocent tokens of the past. As a gatekeeper to what I have elsewhere called the "folkloric imagination" (Cole 2018 [in press]), he holds a profound sway over public memory. Even in academic circles today, the term "folk song" is frequently employed in its Sharpian guise (oral, pastoral, hermetic, evolutionary, national, noncommercial) without significant attention paid to the broader political and discursive contexts that afforded its emergence and proliferation within the public sphere. Instead, it is taken as a given and hence becomes a blind spot. In the current climate, it is worth pausing to reflect on how many of our own ideas, assumptions, and institutions are tacitly indebted to the same patterns of thought as was Sharp. To what degree, we might ask, are organizations such as the English Folk Dance and Song Society, revivalist communities, and educational pathways in folk and traditional music able to confront and overcome the darker side of their intellectual heritage?

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Acknowledgments

A special thank you to Philip Bohlman, Nicholas Cook, Marina Frolova-Walker, Vic Gammon, Oskar Cox Jensen, Ceri Owen, Matthew Pritchard, and the anonymous reviewers for this journal. This project was funded by a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Notes

1. On the history of folklore as a discipline, see Zumwalt (1988); Bendix (1997); and Gelbart (2007).

2. The idea of the invention of tradition was introduced by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Bearman's diagnosis of a certain leftist slant is not misplaced: both Lloyd (1967) and Harker (1985) draw heavily on Marxist historiography. Gramscian theory also underpinned much of British cultural studies, including the writings of Stuart Hall. What I want to highlight here is that a wholesale rejection of such work on political grounds is unhelpful, particularly given the alternative being offered.

3. A selection of these songs was published by the Folk-Song Society with annotations by Frank Kidson, Lucy Broadwood, and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (Sharp 1905); see also Sharp and Marson (1904). For an exploration of the society's activities up to this point, see Cole (2018, in press).

4. See Anon. (1906b). These debates initially occurred in the correspondence pages of the *Morning Post* but were widely reported by other periodicals. Many commentators took issue with the foundations of Sharp's theorizing. In her own rural collecting undertaken prior to the foundation of the Folk-Song Society, for example, Miss A. E. Keeton arrived at a position directly opposed to Sharp: "I then formed the view, which I am not yet disposed to abandon, that these songs—with, on the one hand, their absence of any special racial characteristics, and on the other, certain distinctly modern snatches of rhythm and melody—had drifted in scraps from our towns, or many of them more probably equally in scraps from the Continent. I find them, therefore, no more indigenous to an uncultivated English soil than is the popular air of 'Home, Sweet Home,' for instance" (807).

5. The terms "peasant" and "peasantry" were habitually invoked by folk song enthusiasts during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Sharp's usage derived from a nostalgia for premodern rural life related to his involvement in the Peasant Arts Society (see Knevett and Gammon 2016).

6. These latter two ballads are accessible via the online collection of Oxford's Bodleian Library: http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/edition/5431; http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/edition/4508 (accessed 27 March 2017).

7. On the history of cheap print, see Fox (2000); Marsh (2010); and McDowell (2017). See also Atkinson and Roud (2016); and Watt, Scott, and Spedding (2017).

8. It would be remiss not to mention Percy Grainger, who (unlike Sharp) worked with a phonograph and was fascinated by individual idiosyncrasies in performance (1908a, 1908b). Such modern technology, however, was not especially popular among folk song enthusiasts and often introduced more problems than it solved. After listening to some of Grainger's recordings, for instance, an audience member asked, "Would not the instrument eliminate all the poetry and romance of song collecting?"; one singer, moreover, remarked that performing for the machine was like "singing with a muzzle on" (Anon. 1907a:20, 21). On Grainger's aesthetics, see Robinson and Dreyfus (2015).

9. For examples of what Newman is talking about here, see Fox (2011); and Gelbart (2012).

10. On the convoluted history regarding depictions of the noble savage in colonialist discourse, see Ellingson (2001).

11. The Folk-Song Society's annual report of 1908–9 (Anon. 1910a:iv), for example, listed the areas covered by collectors: "BERKS: Mr. C. Sharp. DEVONSHIRE: Mr. C. Sharp. ESSEX: Dr. Vaughan Williams. GLOUCESTERSHIRE: Mr. C. Sharp, Mr. Percy Grainger. HEREFORDSHIRE:

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Mrs. Leather, Dr. V. Williams. HAMPSHIRE: Dr. G. B. Gardiner. KENT: Mr. C. Sharp, Mr. Percy Grainger. LANCASHIRE (North): Miss Gilchrist. LONDON: Mr. C. Sharp. OXFORDSHIRE: Mr. C. Sharp. RUTLANDSHIRE: Mr. C. Sharp. SURREY: Dr. G. B. Gardiner, Mr. C. Sharp. SOMERSET: Mr. C. Sharp. SUSSEX: Mr. G. S. Kaye Butterworth. WESTMORLAND: Miss Gilchrist. WARWICKSHIRE: Mr. C. Sharp. Wiltshire: Dr. G. B. Gardiner. YORKSHIRE: Miss Gilchrist." In addition, it continued: "The work of Mr. Cecil Sharp and Mr. MacIlwaine in collecting and recording Morris Dances and Tunes also deserves to be chronicled, especially in view of the interesting announcement from the Board of Education that these are now to be included in the curriculum of the Elementary Schools." See also Sharp (1912a, 1913); on the folk dance revival, see Gammon (2008).

12. Degeneration was a key topic of debate among European intellectuals at the fin de siècle, exemplified by Max Nordau's 1892 work, *Entartung*. On the broader transatlantic history of social Darwinism, see Soloway (1995); Hawkins (1997); and Claeys (2000).

13. Prior to his arrival in the United States, Sharp's theories had already been registered and absorbed by American ballad scholars; significantly, Philips Barry cited *English Folk-Song* in the article in which his phrase "communal re-creation" first appeared (1909:77).

14. Fabian tracts were published anonymously; many, however, were by the playwright George Bernard Shaw or the social reformer and politician Sidney Webb (partner of Beatrice Webb). For an extended overview of Fabian views, see Shaw (1889). Webb would later draft the original and controversial "clause 4" of the British Labour Party's constitution.

15. Boyes (1993) points out that Sharp's revivalist vision was beholden to a masculinity grounded in virility and patriotism; such ideals align with fascist approaches to warfare.

16. Sternhell's theory of two competing modernities arising out of the Enlightenment provides a useful way of remapping the dialectic famously proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer (1997).

17. For more positive readings of Herder's aesthetics and epistemology, see Adler and Koepke (2009). For translations of Herder's writings on music and nationalism, see Herder and Bohlman (2017).

18. Roger Griffin (1993) has termed this concept of triumphant national rebirth "palingenesis," proposing that it constitutes the mythical core of fascism. There are a number of revealing parallels between Sharp's ideas and the discourse surrounding music in Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (see Macklin 2013); on British fascism, see Gottlieb and Linehan (2004).

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