Culture/History

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Some years ago, when I was still in graduate school at the University of Michigan, George Lipsitz came to give a talk. I can't remember what it was about anymore. But he said something in the question-and-answer session that I do remember, and I continue to think about. Lipsitz said that, in the real world, culture and history happen together; it is only in academic departments at universities where they are separated.

Much of my intellectual and academic life has been spent trying to put these two things back together by historicizing culture and culturalizing history. It has been a long struggle intellectually, for the underlying ideologies of the field in which one is trained—any field—are very difficult to overcome. As a westerner, and perhaps even more as an American, one comes to believe that things are the way they are because people made them that way, an ideology deeply rooted in Enlightenment thought. In some music disciplines, it is simply taken for granted, without questioning, that music sounds the way it sounds because people wanted it to sound that way. There is very little room left for "culture" or "history" if one subscribes to this individualist notion of the production of music. Yet this notion still dominates the academic study of music, a theme that I tackle explicitly in my forthcoming book (Taylor forthcoming), and have been enunciating in various ways for quite some time now.

It seems to me that in recent years, musicology and ethnomusicology as fields have moved further apart, exacerbating the divide between the study of history and the study of culture. I don't think this estrangement has been the best possible move intellectually for either field, though there have been other benefits at the same time that I wouldn't want to minimize; ethnomusicology coming into its own as an independent field was a very important development for its solidification and maturation as a field of inquiry.

I have been thinking about the culture/history divide more than ever lately, as I have been reading more and more ethnographies, by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists both, that are so focused on a particular social group that outside forces, even history itself, are left to fall by the wayside. It seems that for some writers, the old-fashioned "village ethnography" is alive and well, though in a more highly theorized guise. Such studies of a geographically dispersed group united by musical taste, or studies of a tiny, localized, community, can be very interesting and useful in teaching, but are nonetheless limited in their bracketing off of how historical forces shape particular social groups, individuals, and their music.

A detailed portrait of a social group is a useful thing in and of itself, of course, but if that group isn't seen, in part, as the product of social and historical forces, its unique place in culture/history might be compromised, or even overlooked. The practices and ideologies of that group come to be seen as unique to itself, not the results of broad social, cultural, and historical forces that might have produced similar practices and ideologies in other groups. What might be unique about a particular group is lost.

To make it clear that this is not a blanket condemnation, let me offer praise for some recent books that have tried to bridge the culture/history—and ethnomusicology/musicology—gap in interesting and productive ways. There are a growing number of such works, but space permits mentioning only a few: Veit Erlmann (1999), in writing what he calls a "historical ethnography," conducted extensive archival and historical research on South African musics to make a compelling argument about modernity and globalization, in South Africa's recent past and earlier periods. Ronald Radano's extraordinary book deconstructs some of the accreted knowledge about black music (Radano 2003), calling into question many cherished clichés about this music and its practices; Radano similarly makes extensive use of historical materials, including archives.

Other recent studies combine different methodologies in insightful and useful ways. One example is Helen Rees (2000), whose thoughtful combination of archival and ethnographic research about the Naxi people of Yunnan Province in China is a model of its kind. Anthropologist William Mazzarella's (2003) ethnography of advertising in India moves fluidly between usages of archival materials, oral history, and ethnography in making a gripping analysis of advertising and consumerism in Bombay. Mark Katz (2004), a musicologist, has written a history of the phonograph that shows how this machine insinuated itself into people's everyday live and modes of thinking about music, offering a sophisticated cultural history of this device.

With these and other writings, I am encouraged that the culture/history divide is being broken down. But it's a slow

journey, one I think that we undertake with increasing urgency: it is difficult to have a politics, a political viewpoint, if culture or history are marginalized in work. And in the era in which we find ourselves, it seems to be ever more urgent to have the ability to make a critique.

Let me conclude with a quotation from Michel Foucault. “History,” he writes, “has a more important task than to be a handmaiden to philosophy, to recount the necessary birth of truth and values; it should become a differential knowledge of energies and failings, heights and degenerations, poisons and anecdotes” (Foucault 1997:156). In short, history should be ethnographic. And ethnography should not neglect history.

References

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