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ON THE APPROPRIATENESS OF FUNCTIONALISM
TO A SCIENCE OF FOLKLORISTICS

BY
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Folklore Theory

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"Men do not think they know a thing until they have grasped the 'why' of it." With this statement, Aristotle recognized a characteristic of human thought and investigation that has, in this century, been developed into the social science school of functionalism. Functionalism ultimately aims to answer a question that has long interested students of human behavior and culture: why do we do the things we do? Or perhaps, the functionalists would say, it is too complex a matter to ascertain why humans do what they do and a better question is one that asks what purposes are served by human patterns of action; what are the unintended consequences of our sociocultural patterns? What purpose is served, anthropologists have asked, by the observance of ritual food taboos in certain tribal societies by men whose wives are pregnant?¹ Or, on a smaller scale, what are the unintended consequences of the retention of magic folk beliefs by people of a very identifiable occupational group such as commercial fishermen on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico?²

The assumption behind the questions mentioned above is this: sociocultural patterns have consequences which can be separated from the conscious intentions of the persons who continually participate in those patterns. Certain practices have functions which are important to the actor (i.e., the person who participates in the pattern under study) but of which he or she is not consciously aware.³ Artistic expression can be included in this category of behavior patterns with hidden but vital functions. One purpose of this paper is to look at the artistic expression of one traditional artist in Bowling Green, Kentucky and propose a way in which the functionalist school might interpret her art.

But in 1976 the Journal of American Folklore published an article by folklorist Elloitt Oring in which Oring proposed that functionalism should not be satisfied with merely interpreting a sociocultural pattern as it has done in the past but, rather, that it take on the task of explaining a pattern.⁴ (Oring repeatedly suggests that the word explain connotes the establishing of a causal connection between the function and the sociocultural pattern.) In this paper I wish to examine Oring's arguments for two purposes: (1) to ascertain whether they seem wholly correct if we assume, for the moment, that we are, indeed, trying as a discipline to formulate a science of folkloristics and (2) to decide whether his theories can be applied to the fieldwork results reported herein for the purpose of examining one person's art and its possible function. Then I wish to make a case for what might be called a humanistic perspective on the school of functionalism which would alleviate the necessity for conclusions which can be proved or disproved with the methods now available to the researcher.

According to Oring's explanation of functionalism, the school was defined by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, two anthropologists of note in this century. Oring states:

Functionalism . . . emerges as a particular theoretical orientation which asserts that (1) sociocultural patterns have consequences which are independent of the conscious intentions of the actors who perform them, (2) these patterns may be explained or understood in terms of these consequences, and (3) these consequences are explanatory only if they contribute and are necessary to the proper integration and functioning of the individual and society.⁵

Francesca M. Cancian, author of the article on "Varieties of Functional Analysis" in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, and important source for Elloitt Oring, defines functionalism like this:

Traditional functionalism has been defined as those analyses that use certain concepts (adaptation, integration, functional prerequisites and equivalents) and that explicitly or implicitly use the paradigm of functional explanation in which social patterns are explained by their effects.⁶

It is the functionalism of Bronislaw Malinowski, however, that is of great relevance to this paper. Malinowski, perhaps acutely interested in keeping the anthropos in anthropology, says Oring, emphasized the idea that culture and cultural patterns are derived from basic needs of the individual.⁷ He did go on to investigate the idea that the needs of a complex society might be equally responsible for culture ^ubut it is important here to note that Malinowski at least considered the importance of a sociocultural pattern's function to the individual. Although this has not been the mainstream of functional studies, it is also not a totally new perspective. It is on this premise--that the function of a sociocultural pattern to an individual is of importance--that the fieldwork for this study was based.

Esther Isbell is a 77 year old seamstress who lives with her husband in a small frame house which they built upon moving to Bowling Green in the 1930s. Until October of 1979 she maintained a store front on Bowling Green's Main Street where she sewed for customers and where, more importantly and, perhaps, more often in later years, she met customers who came to her upon hearing of her hand-painted Bible quilts. In October of 1979 she closed her shop because of a fire which severely damaged the building, moved her place of work to her home, and now displays her art works on the enclosed front porch of her home. In addition to her painted Bible quilts which have brought her some local notoriety, she does paintings of her "old homeplace" and other scenes from the past that present themselves to her mind's eye.⁸

As a young girl, Isbell lived in rural Barron County, Kentucky and it was there that her pattern of artistic expression began. She began with sewing:

It always came just as natural for me to sew as anything in the world. When I first began, my daddy brought me some quilt pieces for me to learn how to put quilts together and cut quilts, you know. . . . When I was in the country I'd either draw or I'd crochet or tatt or I'd knit or I'd sew for people.⁹

If we use a variation on the method that Spradley and McCurdy have called "grand tour" questioning and, thus, draw conclusions about where analytical emphasis should lie based on the points emphasized by the informant herself,¹⁰ then the appropriate place to focus here is on Isbell's love of innovation. She seems rarely to have been satisfied with making the usual forms of art out of the traditional materials. Continuing her discussion of her early days of sewing, she said; "Well, I began to take the biggest ones [the biggest quilt pieces] and make me doll dresses and from that I began to branch out. . . ." ¹¹ She did, however, use some quilt patterns that are traditional to southern quilters, such as the Dutch Doll. But even when using such a traditional pattern she was still fond of innovation. She said, "I didn't make that Dutch Doll like people usually make her; I made it out of my own imagination and put about twice as much work on it. I'm crazy about it."¹²

And today it is her painted Bible quilts for which she is best known in Bowling Green. She has made quilts of pictures of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, usually of nylon, and usually using 20 to 64 blocks per quilt, each with a Biblical scene painted on it and a caption carefully lettered below. When relating the circumstances under which she made her first Bible quilt, Isbell said:

I've always studied the Bible; I'm a Bible student. . . . So, I was sitting here one night and I come to a picture of Moses in the bull rush--that was the subject I was studying on that night. And it just

come to me like a moving picture show, the picture did. I said to my husband, I said, "I'm going to draw that." So I got me a piece of paper and got my pencil and I went in and say down in the dining room in there and I drew it, and I thought, "Well, that would be pretty if it was on a cloth." So I went and got me a piece of white cloth and I cut it out about 20 by 20 and I drew Moses in the bull rush and I colored it. I had some coloring crayons here, just regular coloring crayons. And I colored that and I thought, "Well, that would make a pretty chair cushion." I didn't make the chair cushion but I had that in mind. So the next day I was sitting here looking at it and I thought, "Well, if I can do one I can do the other." So I went and cut me 20 blocks--I knew about what it'd take to make a quilt. I began painting different sceneries from Bible pictures, you know So after I got them 20 blocks [painted] I began setting them together. 13

Certainly it is not difficult to recognize the innovation present in a quilt which is not pieced or patched, not appliqued, but painted. Isbell is proud of the unique quality of her quilts; they are now displayed in three different museums scattered over the United States and her work is included in the recently published Traditional ^{Arts and} Crafts of Warren County, Kentucky, by folklorist Annie Archbold. 14

The question to be considered here, according to the school of functionalism, is this: what are the unintended consequences of Esther Isbell's pattern of expressing herself artistically, a pattern which began in her childhood and continues today? And, more specifically, what is the attraction she finds in putting her own innovations in the things she makes? What consequences compel her to take traditional materials and create something new?

Being interested in examining the possible function of Isbell's art, I asked her repeatedly, "Why?" Why did she do art as a child in the country? Why does she now feel such an attraction to art? Why does she paint her quilts? Function, of course, refers to unconscious motives; I think most people would agree, however, that there are usually identifiable reasons for doing a thing which one does so often and with such interest and regularity as she does her art.

Over and over she said, "It becomes a part of you;" "it just does something to you," and with even more frequency she said, "It settles my nerves," or "It rests my mind." She explained:

When there's something that you enjoy doing, it just makes you, well, it just rests you, it rests your mind. Now after I'd sew all day down there on Main Street, maybe I'd make 2, 3 dresses in one day--and you've got to stay at it if you do it, too. Then, when I'd come home, I'd get my painting out, I'd paint and I'd just relax and when I'd go to bed I wouldn't be a bit tired. It rests you. And they laughed at me about maybe sometimes when I went to church, I'd be so tired. If I went within myself, I'd say, "Well, I'm not a-going; I'm going to bed." But I wouldn't do it; I'd just get ready and go on to church and, by the time we got through--I play and sing, too--by the time we got through, why, I'd feel just as rested as if I hadn't done nothing all day.¹⁵

Here Isbell has called attention to an idea long accepted by philosophers and psychologists of the artistic process, i.e., that the specific medium sometimes makes no difference when considering the personal benefits of artistic expression. But, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that Isbell has really explained anything new here about the function or even the conscious benefits of art. Ernst Fisher, author of The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach, says this:

To say [art offers] distraction, relaxation, entertainment, is to beg the question. Why is it distracting, relaxing, entertaining to sink oneself in someone else's life and problems, to identify oneself with a painting or a piece of music or with the characters in a novel, play or film?¹⁶

The functionalist school would, along with Mr. Fisher, look deeper for the consequences that accompany Isbell's artistic expression and her love of innovation. In speaking of the art she did as a child, Isbell explained an attitude of her father's: "My father thought that when a girl was leaving home to go to school that was one of the worst things in the world that ever happened. He wouldn't hear of that. They just thought that a girl should stay at home."¹⁷ The widespread

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attraction of the feminist movement in this country is evidence of the fact that the attitude held by Isbell's father has not been an uncommon one in the experience of American women; the effect, however, is no less important in this case, especially considering the fact that her husband's attitude has always been somewhat similar to that of her father. She said:

If you've ever seen a baby that's been petted and humored all their life you're looking at one. He Isbell's husband still thinks that I'm little. I never will grow up to him. The children has said to him a lot of times, and the grandchildren says to him, "Papa, Mom's big enough to take care of herself." "Well, [he says] I'm afraid something will happen to her." ¹⁸

So, by the two men with the strongest influence in her life, Isbell has been considered to be a person to be taken care of, looked out for, protected. Very little attention seems to have been given to the fact that she would have liked to go on in school past the ninth grade and obviously has the ability to have been quite successful had she done so, or that she is a strong woman probably capable of taking care of herself in the overwhelming majority of situations.

Esther Isbell voices no serious complaint, however, about either her husband's or her father's attitudes; in fact, when speaking of these attitudes mentioned above, she does so with some sense of humor.¹⁹ It is possible to conclude, then, that one way she has avoided directly confronting her father and/or her husband about their attitudes toward her as a woman, a thing which has been very hard for a woman to do because of the assumption that she may be stepping out of her "place," Isbell found it necessary to develop a skill or activity with which she can demonstrate her competence, and achieve the success and recognition that she may have been denied due to the over-protectiveness of her father and, then, of her husband. Her art has allowed her to do that. Not only did she excell in the craft of sewing to the extent that she did it professionally for most of her

life, but she also did her art with such innovation and creativity that it has been recognized in Bowling Green and surrounding areas as well as in three other areas of the country. It is a possible conclusion of the functionalist school that Isbell's innovative art has provided her with a medium through which to demonstrate that she is a very capable and talented person and, thus, not one in need of the protection and care of the type showered on her by her father and husband, the type usually offered a child.

However, Elliott Oring would argue, here again as in the past functionalism is concluding with an interpretation of a sociocultural pattern and not an explanation. Oring believes that functionalism should have as its goal the explanation of sociocultural phenomena, ^{that} it must establish a causal relationship between the consequences of the sociocultural pattern in question and the fact that the pattern persists. And he agrees with Robert Brown, author of Explanation in Social Science, when Brown says that "we must be able to bring evidence to bear on whether the causal connection claimed to be present is so in fact."²⁰ Basing his ideas on the work of Kenneth Ketner and Francesca M. Cancian, he further explains exactly what must be done for this causal connection to be demonstrated satisfactorily. He states:

- . . . for the explanation to meet the minimum requirements for adequate scientific explanation, it must deduce the proposition to be explained (explanans) from a general lawlike statement in conjunction with statements of initial conditions which describe the relevant circumstances that are associated with the proposition to be explained (explanandum). Furthermore;
- I. these propositions must be clearly stated to enable recognition of a negative case;
 - II. the lawlike statement must not be empirically false;
 - III. the statement of initial conditions must be true; and
 - IV. the proposition explained must logically derive from the lawlike statement and the statement of initial conditions.
- If any of these principles is violated, the given explanation cannot be regarded as an adequate scientific deductive explanation.²¹

Oring further states:

. . . in our attempt to establish a science of folkloristics, we must heed the injunction to formulate testable hypotheses [my emphasis] in an effort to construct those empirical generalizations which provide the higher levels of understanding that we seek.²²

If we agree with Oring that it is, indeed, a science of folkloristics for which we strive as a discipline, then it is still necessary to examine his arguments to ascertain whether or not they are correct in their application of (loosely speaking) scientific method to functionalism. Functionalism, to be sure, represents a problem in methodology if we aim at use of the scientific method. Oring suggests the existence of this problem when he complains that functional conclusions have too often been unverifiable or even unobservable empirically.

Functionalism is not alone in this methodological problem, however. On the subject of psychoanalytic theory and its own methodological problems, philosopher William P. Alston says that "some philosophers have objected that the theory postulates unobservable entities."²³ It seems, then, ^{that some believe} that psychoanalysis also fails to conform to accepted methodological models due to its reference to unobservable phenomena, just as Oring believes of functionalism.

But both Oring and the objecting philosophers referred to above have failed to consider that this practice of referring to unobservable relationships or entities is not an uncommon one even in a highly respected branch of the physical sciences. Who has observed electromagnetic fields or energy quanta, asks Alston, and yet no one seems to dispute their usefulness.²⁴ The case of functionalism is a similar one and Oring should realize, I think, that the fact that an entity or a relationship or the truth of a theory cannot be observed empirically does not negate its worth according to the precedents set by the physical sciences.

In addition, there seems to be a fundamental difference in the process involved in prediction, as in the physical sciences, and in that of explanation, explanation being a goal for which Oring says functionalism must aim if it is to qualify as a science. In explaining the function of an event or pattern already passed (or already engaged in to some extent in the past), the functionalist has the knowledge that the event or pattern has already occurred (or has already started occurring) and he or she then reasons back to its source or its function, rather than having to specify certain conditions under which one will lead to the other.²⁵ (We should note here that functionalism has never claimed that a given condition is sufficient to cause a sociocultural pattern but, rather, that one can result in the other.) Were the functionalist trying to predict a future pattern, however, he or she would need a comprehensive statement of the conditions that would, in fact, result in that sociocultural pattern.

Finally, Oring repeatedly claims that functionalists must show a causal connection between the conditions under study and the sociocultural patterns ~~they~~^{that} they postulate are connected with these conditions or are possible results of these conditions in order to have explained the function involved.²⁶ He seems to assume that this idea of a causal connection is one that is accepted by the physical sciences. Science itself, ^{however} is quite uneasy with the concept of causality and prefers to record that one thing consistently occurs in the presence of another and carefully avoid the statement that one is the cause of the other.²⁷ If physics, for example, finds it necessary to be so careful with this concept, then it is reasonable to question Oring's requirement that functionalists show a causal connection to be present in fact in order to be respectable as a method ⁱⁿ of the science of folkloristics.

These points and, perhaps, others like them suggest that Elliott Oring has made some errors in his perception of the ways in which the scientific method might apply to functionalism and that he has gone too far in his proposal that functionalism should comply to what he defines as scientific methodology. In fact, ^{Oring's suggestion} ~~the idea~~ that we are striving for a "science of folkloristics" is an over-reaction, I think, to the folklorists who would argue that folklore has left its "first love," as it were, the oral traditions of that class of society classically defined as "the folk."

And what of the problem undertaken in the fieldwork for this paper concerning the function of art to an individual? It seems that Oring's scientific approach cannot be applied to research concerning individual psychological function for one major reason: Oring's call for "testable hypotheses" along with the theory of falsifiability (itself a debatable principle among philosophers) on which his Principle I (page 8) is based both require research of a group rather than an individual in order that the group might supply cases to be tested. How is a researcher to test a hypothesis or "recognize a negative case" within one individual? And yet it seems legitimate to ask what the function of a specific socio-cultural pattern is as it exists to a specific individual.

Perhaps Oring must leave room in his theory for a hypothesis which is testable in principle but not in practice.²⁶ The usual method for testing for the consequences of a personal action is obvious--the researcher would usually ask the actor himself or herself. Since functionalism deals with unintended consequences, however, the researcher cannot verify the hypothesis by this method. At this point I would suggest that we realize that the hypothesis is testable in principle and that at some later date social science methodology may advance to the point of describing a testing method for it.

One can imagine a continuum of academic disciplines from the most "scientific" (although even the use of this kind of term is increasingly called into question) of the ^{physical} sciences such as physics and chemistry, to the sort of "in-betweens" such as psychoanalysis and psychology, to the social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, and, finally, to the humanities such as art and literature criticism, who seek no scientific method at all but, rather, the illumination of valuable pieces of human expression. Why, then, does Oring suggest that a discipline such as folklore jump all the way to the "science" category, something that even psychoanalysis has not been able to accomplish successfully, rather than settling down and defining its methodology as a social science? Even Cancian, whom Oring repeatedly uses as a source, suggests that it seems reasonable for functionalists to content themselves with functional considerations of small units and avoid sweeping, lawlike generalizations until they develop the methods to apply rigorous controls to their research. ²⁹

I wish to suggest, then, that conclusions such as the one explained herein concerning the ^{personal} function of Esther Isbell's art are still of value even though we now lack the methods needed for structuring them in compliance with a rigorous scientific standard. Anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong has supplied one rationale for this point of view in two volumes published in 1971 and 1975 in which he suggests the existence of what he calls "humanistic anthropology." ³⁰ Humanistic anthropology, as defined by Armstrong, does not strive at a scientific method at all. Consider the following:

Since humanistic anthropology is an art rather than a science (by which I mean that it is dedicated to the illumination of experience and not to the definition of some item of "reverifiable knowledge") alternative propositions are possible for any given culture. ³¹

If there can exist humanistic anthropology, then there can also exist humanistic functionalism or humanistic folkloristics. By suggesting a possible function of one person's art, for instance, functionalists can certainly illuminate experience and that illumination is not lessened by the fact that the function is not testable empirically. To be sure, this method represents the approach usually taken by the humanities and not by the sciences, but Elloit Oring would be wise, I think, to avoid advocating a scientific methodology before he is ready to ascertain the differences between researching culture on the societal and individual levels and researching the questions of the physical sciences. In addition, he should realize a trap into which one can easily fall. One can easily become so concerned with methodology and the advocacy of a science of folkloristics that he or she fails to realize that even suggestions of function do serve the ultimate purpose of the folklorist, i.e., to come upon a better understanding of the cultural patterns of the people under study, whether or not these suggestions of function conform to the methodology of the physical sciences at this time.

NOTES

¹A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Taboo," reprinted in Reader in Comparative Religion, ed. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (New York, 1972), pp. 72-83.

²Patrick B. Mullen, "The Function of Magic Folk Beliefs Among Texas Coastal Fishermen," Journal of American Folklore 82 (1969), pp. 214-225.

³Francesca M. Cancian, "Varieties of Functional Analysis," in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, ed. David Sills (New York, 1968), Vol. 6, 36.

⁴Elliott Oring, "Three Functions of Folklore: Traditional Functionalism as Explanation in Folkloristics," Journal of American Folklore 89 (1976), pp. 67-80.

⁵Oring, p. 70.

⁶Cancian, p. 36.

⁷Oring, p. 68.

⁸Esther Isbell, interview, Bowling Green, Kentucky, December 2, 1980.

⁹Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society, (Chicago, 1972), p. 62.

¹¹Isbell, interview.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Annie Archbold, Traditional Arts and Crafts of Warren County, Kentucky (Bowling Green, Kentucky, 1980), p. 18.

¹⁵Isbell, interview.

¹⁶Ernst Fisher, The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach (New York, 1959), p. 8.

¹⁷Isbell, interview.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See Susan Kalçik, "'...like Ann's gynecologist or the time I was almost raped': Personal Narratives in Women's Rap Groups," Journal of American Folklore 88 (1975), pp. 3-11 for a discussion of the common nature of this phenomenon.

²⁰Oring, p. 72-73.

²¹Oring, p. 71.

²²Oring, p. 80.

²³William P. Alston, "Logical Status of Psychoanalytic Theories," in Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), Vol. 6, 513.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Alston, p. 515.

²⁶Oring, p. 73.

²⁷R. S. Walters, "Laws of Science and Lawlike Statements," in Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1967), Vol. 4, 412.

²⁸This idea came out of a discussion with Walter Sikora.

²⁹Cancian, p. 36.

³⁰Robert Plant Armstrong, The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology (Illinois, 1971) and Armstrong, Wellspring: On the Myth and Source of Culture (Berkeley, 1975).

³¹Armstrong, Wellspring, p. 7.

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