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Richard Dorson and the Great Debates

Richard Dorson (1916–1981) was once described as the man who did for folklore what Kinsey did for sex (Brunvand 1982, 347). It is an image of a man putting his subject forward before the public seriously, and controversially, and placing it on scholarly footing from the 1950s through the 1980s. The similarity between the two luminaries went beyond the fact that both Dorson and Kinsey were associated with institutes at Indiana University, and both had a cultural impact on attitudes of Americans about themselves. Dorson's subject was, like sexuality, often considered raw entertainment rather than the stuff of science. Because of this perception, Dorson expressed the uneasy relationship of folklore to mass media, and pointed to the absence of eroticism in popularized folklore texts to show that mass culture lies and folk culture speaks honestly. It was a keynote he chimed through many public presentations starting with criticisms of folklore treasuries and ending with barbs at Foxfire programming in elementary schools. As if to connect him to the challenge of Kinsey, Dorson referred in his last survey of folklore studies to the deposit of “Unprintable Ozark Folklore” by Vance Randolph at the Sex Research Institute (Dorson 1982b, 101; Randolph 1976). While both figures considered their books and views after World War II liberating, and above ideology, they also ended their careers besmirched for their biases (Morantz 1977).

Dorson touted a new academic, indeed a new class of scholars devoted to revealing the profundity of the ordinary. The academics thought in terms of movements, of democratizing the ivory tower, of wielding influence in the troubled public realm. A prime example for them was the interdisciplinary study of American culture and formation of an objective history of tradition. To be sure, surveys of the 1940s revealed the steady expansion of courses on folklore and American culture in American universities before Dorson came on the scene (Boggs 1940; Dorson 1950b; Wise 1979). But while folklore entered established language or anthropology departments with increasing frequency, or as an interdisciplinary enterprise,
Dorson worked forcefully for a separate disciplinary home in folklore that would promote connections to American studies and crusade for its place in the scholarly landscape (Dorson 1963c, 1972a). He launched his campaign for legitimacy in great debates waged in magazines, books, and meetings that drew wide public notice. The issue on the table was the proper representation, and interpretation, of historic American culture in light of the post-World War II rise of mass media and nationalism. First he took on popularizers regarding the authenticity of tradition, and then he scrapped with colleagues in the academy over the historical realization of a national tradition.

Dorson’s distinctive position among folklorists of his era is that unlike most of his anthropological and literary colleagues, he championed an historical consciousness of folklore’s role in what he envisioned as an American civilization arising from the unique conditions of the New World. He would speak often of a special American type with its own traditions, a distinctive “American folklore” rather than imported “folklore in America.” Maybe “shout” or “argue” would be more apt terms for his presentation, since he had the effect of making the discourse on tradition in American culture more acrimonious by distinguishing between the positive values of the private academic and the commercial public. Beating back popularizers, ideologues, and creative artists who would use folklore in response to popular taste, he set an intellectual tone for the presentation of folklore in which academic authority would dictate what the public would believe about their tradition. He insisted that folklore was not fair game for writers and film producers. Instead, it was an academic specialty open to highly qualified experts. Accordingly, he touted American folklore studies as a discipline as well as a subject with its own special theories and methods. Above all, he often exclaimed, its students would have exclusive license to speak for American culture in public and academic circles.

Analyzing Dorson’s influence is complicated by his often wavering intellectual position, between the public and academy, international and national realms. Academically, Dorson directed an astounding eighty-six dissertations and had a hand in many more, and he unashamedly boasted of imperially placing his students in college positions across the country. His messages of the need for establishing authenticity in folklore and the academic rigor of folklore studies iterated in his internationalist textbook Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction reached many thousands of students every year in large lecture halls. His American Folklore and, later, Handbook of American Folklore meanwhile pressed ahead with the exceptionalism of American culture. Although his books covering a national tradition reached a wide audience, his “doctoral children” in their publications did not necessarily adopt his historical view of American civilization. Michael Owen Jones’s dedication to Craftsman of the Cumberlands (1989) epitomized many students’ feelings toward their mentor: “Richard M. Dorson (1916–1981), historian and folklorist, who inspired many of us in his charge, whether or not we followed the path
of folklore studies quite as he did.” Inspiring he was, for the academic pursuit of cultural knowledge through folklore studies, for the veneration of the authentic artifact of tradition, for the use of history and the empirical experience of fieldwork (Georges 1989a; Abrahams 1989; Ben-Amos 1989). There is little denying his tremendous organizational influence and his pivotal role in setting the agenda for academic research and its role in popular culture and public discourse from the 1950s through the 1980s (Harrah-Conforth 1989). His legendary battles pitting “genuine” folklore against fakelore, and universalist emphasis on traditional behavior in America against an exceptional historical American tradition, helped to galvanize intellectual energy to the role of folklore study in characterizing as well as documenting a complex culture such as America’s. The sometimes rancorous public discourse at meetings and in the press drew attention to the political significance of folklore as a tool of cultural production, even manipulation, in addition to its naive intellectual use for cultural stereotyping. Dorson the public intellectual, therefore, needs to be understood as critic of mass culture and promoter of academic authority in a discourse of American culture in the post-World War II decades.

Citation indexes list Dorson as America’s most quoted folklorist for three decades, and indeed one of the most cited Americanists during that period. He preached the “gospel,” as he put it, of American folklore, of a national tradition, through scholarship rather than popularized texts, but his America in Legend (1973a) published by the leading American publisher of Random House drew wide notice in the media and enjoyed huge sales as a Book of the Month Club selection in 1974. With major titles to his credit on American folklore and history, he is still remembered as the ultimate Americanist, but he spent considerable time abroad and published books on Japan, Africa, and Britain. He was Fulbright professor of American studies at the University of Tokyo for an academic year (1956–1957), and twice received Guggenheim fellowships to study the history of British folklore studies (1949–1950, 1964–1965). At times, he could sound antinationalist, or internationalist, or regionalist, but often his backtracking was in the form of warnings against the extremes of nationalism as fascism rather than an abandonment of his position on the integrity of an American tradition. He taught that a folklorist in a lifetime could barely collect a county with anything resembling comprehensiveness, no less represent a nation, and yet he may be best remembered for popular editions of American Folklore (1959, 1977) in Chicago’s History of American Civilization Series, edited by fellow Harvard alumnus Daniel Boorstin.

Dorson praised Boorstin, the academic turned public historian, with best exemplifying American studies—“combining literary, social, cultural, and folk history, and following the contours of the civilization produced in the United States” (Dorson 1979). Reading further into their mutual admiration, one finds a significant reinterpretation of American self-awareness in their effort. By emphasizing the cultural components of American history—much of it based in cities, regions,
occupations, industries, and immigrants—they relocated American tradition in a
democratic social process that went well beyond the Turneresque reduction of a
unified American character to frontier settlement or Charles Beard's interpreta-
tion of elites' economic self-interest. The America they described showed cultural
democracy set into motion by experiences Boorstin and Dorson knew from their
urban and ethnic observations. Underscoring Dorson's use of cultural traditions
to optimistically account for an exceptional, dynamic America, Boorstin prefaced
Dorson's book with the claim that "the folklore of a people is as distinctive as any-
thing else about them. The new American places—the colonial fireside, the back-
woods bearhunt, the city slum, or the college campus—make a difference. American literacy and the American standard of living change the channels of
folklore" (Boorstin 1959, ix–x).

Boorstin and Dorson collaborated on what they saw as a common cause for a
distinctive American culture recovered historically, and in so doing engaged an
intellectual establishment in debate. “You're a man after my own heart,” Boorstin
wrote Dorson after reading American Folklore. Noting reviews critical of Boorstin's
downplay of great historical events and figures in favor of charting everyday life,
Dorson meanwhile urged Boorstin on by writing, “I prophesy you will dethrone
Parrington and shave Beard to a whisker.” They worked on their sweeping nation-
al surveys at the same time, and in fact, they sent letters to each other competing
for who would reach their deadlines first. Boorstin prepared The Americans: The
Colonial Experience (1958) with advice from Dorson on folklore references, and
Dorson relied on Boorstin for material in his chapter on colonial traditions (see
also Boorstin 1965, 1973). They were both in Japan on Fulbright grants at the same
time in 1957, and frequently listed each other for grant recommendations. Dorson
backed Boorstin's battle against historians of the time about accepting cultural evi-
dence, and in commenting on a negative review by John Higham, he opined: “Like
too many historians he doesn't appreciate culture, in the anthropological sense,
and has to keep dragging in liberal and conservative labels, to pigeonhole other
historians. The new historiography in The Americans, to my view, is its treatment
of colonial civilization in categories to cultural anthropology—religion, law, lan-
guage, education—which each reflect what Herskovits calls the focus and drift of a
culture.” After visiting with Dorson in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1959 Boorstin
gratefully wrote, “I'm increasingly amazed by your grasp of American history and
culture in the large, as well as your intimacy and mastery of folklore. For me, it's a
wonderful thing to have the advantage of your guidance in this field which is so
important to my work, and in which I'm such a novice.” Boorstin made his final
tribute in Dorson's obituary which was carried nationally by United Press
International: "He was a man of great stature who produced monumental works
in the field of folklore" (September 14, 1981).

Dorson commands attention because he was the most vocal proponent in pub-
lic discourse on an American national tradition evident through folklore
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Abrahams 1989; Wilson 1989). My concern is with the way Dorson tried to direct the conversation on American culture toward a realization of authentic local folk traditions that could represent a national consensus. I will begin my discussion of Dorson's outlook on tradition with his debate on "fakelore" and the popular representation of American folklore. This will take me into an account of several battles engaged by Dorson, including the protracted one with Benjamin Botkin over the purity of folkloric texts and its implication for establishing an authoritarian, "New Class" voice for interpreting American tradition. This will lead to a discussion of scholarly response to Dorson's "theory for American folklore" which attempted to develop a historical approach to American tradition, and the related dichotomy between "American folklore" and "folklore in America."

My observations depend on Dorson's lectures and his talks with me as much as my reading of his papers. I came to Indiana because my collegiate advisers told me he was America's preeminent folklorist. I served as his editorial assistant and I often questioned him about what he wrote. Because I had come to Indiana from New York where I had worked on New York Folklore Quarterly and taken courses from one of his nemeses, Louis C. Jones, he used to regale me with stories of his clashes with the New York popularizers and their journal (I heard the other side from Jones). Dorson was regularly a topic of conversation among his students and colleagues, and in my assessments I took into account his image in and out of academe. I was a student in his memorable American Civilization class and I had him on my dissertation committee. I heard every paper he gave at American Folklore Society meetings from 1975 until his death. I have vivid memories of traveling with him to Hoosier Folklore Society meetings and seeing him at social occasions in his home, at my home, and at the university. Wherever he appeared, he was a center of attention and every chat touched on folklore, either a recent "find" he had to relate, or a publication on the subject he had in press. One oral history of Dorson went even further to describe him as "the center of everything that happened.""He had energy and style," the account explained, "You didn't like it necessarily, or didn't believe it or want to believe it; but he had some kind of style, and great energy. And around energy, people congeal" (Harrah-Conforth 1989, 346). He had public and academic notoriety from the ample press covering his campaigns and controversies. He wielded authority as the director of the Folklore Institute through three decades, so I listened to what foundation officials, publishers, and readers had to say about him. He was a man on several missions, among them setting the public straight on folklore and building appreciation for American tradition from a historical perspective. He was, as his colleague Edson Richmond reflected, a man remarkably obsessed, and equally a man of extraordinary influence (Richmond 1981).

Dorson was born March 12, 1916, to affluent parents of German-Jewish background in New York City. Although he was aware of his ancestry, he denied having much of an ethnic identity during his childhood. He later referred to the cultural
persistence of New York's many ethnic communities; however, at his Park Avenue address he considered himself assimilated. He eventually affiliated with the Unitarian church which sounded his scholarly keynote of unity from variety. It held an appeal to him as a liberal theology stressing inquiry, progress, and diversity of individual ideas in the unity of spiritual thought (Faust 1909, 2:426). Leaving his multiethnic New York City base in his youth, Dorson followed the path of elite institutions in New England announcing arrival into the unity of American society. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy, a prestigious boys' preparatory school in New Hampshire, with historic roots in the young Republic (established 1781). He was unsure of a career goal when he devoted himself to raise his dismal grade in history at Exeter and snared a prize for the most-improved student in the subject. Showing scholarly promise, he advanced to Harvard, but by his own account, his undergraduate energy was largely devoted to squash and tennis competition, and he probably took greater pride at that time in becoming intercollegiate squash champion and earning a high ranking in tennis than in pursuing scholarship.

Despite his admission of slacking in the classroom, it was not because he held his professors in low esteem. At Harvard during the mid-1930s, Dorson majored in history and literature, and was attracted to eminent Americanists such as Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen, Ralph Barton Perry, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., Kenneth Murdock, and Howard Mumford Jones in a new scholarly movement to promote the integrated study of American history, literature, and arts, especially from the colonial to national periods before the Civil War. Dorson reminisced that “the talk and the writing in those days was all of the American experience, now suddenly revealed as an independent, mature, intricate, and noble civilization” (Dorson 1971a, 79–80; see also Dorson 1976a; Hylton 1987). It was rebellious talk and writing about innocents in a wicked academic world and an anti-intellectual society (Berkhofer 1979, 341). It sought a consensus of American culture from the democratic experience of the agrarian American republic into the plural, even fragmented, appearance of industrial-ethnic America. As part of this movement, Dorson was perhaps closest at Harvard to Professor Howard Mumford Jones, who provided the following justification for the blossoming of scholarly interest in American culture, “In a period of intense economic and social strain ... the country needs to cling to its traditions; it needs, in Van Wyck Brooks' phrase, a 'usable past’” (emphasis added; Hylton 1987, 4). In the upper echelons of Harvard's administration, the new program in American civilization that Dorson joined could also be supported to meet the perceived threat at the time of “alien” ideologies such as communism and fascism (Hylton 1987, 6). From the viewpoint of many of the students and faculty in the program's first classes, an essential task was to clarify the Americanism of American ideas.

Concerned that the academic study of America would struggle in a fragmented disciplinary university structure built on English and German precedent, advocates for an American civilization program sought an interdisciplinary American
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academic enterprise reflecting American conditions. Americanist refugees from English escaped the reign of socially removed philology and a distant British canon, while a newly formed path from history led away from ancient European sites toward the modern cultural as well as political emergence of the United States. In the midst of a "machine age" in which immigrants, industrial workers, and regional migrants—the so-called "common man"—drew attention to a changing, diverse country, American studies located the nation's cultural roots in pastoral-religious allegories such as the "myth of the garden" and "myth of the innocent Adam" that proclaimed the uniqueness and holism of American experience (Smith 1950; Marx 1964; Mechling 1989d, 14–15). The Americanists shaped contexts for their work that suggested the possibilities of cultural as well political democracy—built on the consensus model of pluralism among common people—in a new troubled age corrupted by abuses of capitalism, racism, and technology (Marx 1979; Mechling 1989d). The new movement, in fact, allowed, and even encouraged, new participants in the academy—particularly ethnic Catholics and Jews—with cultural subjects to shake the dominance of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and their elitist studies in the university (Hollinger 1975; Marx 1979).

The American studies movement rallied enthusiasm by denouncing obstacles and enemies to the cause of Americans appreciating an American heritage. It reminded its participants of the need for fight—within the elitist academy and the anti-intellectual public sector (Mechling 1989d, 24). Dorson seemed to have taken this message to heart when he pronounced the birth, indeed the spirit, of American studies in the "crusading fervor" of the Harvard Americanists and described himself as a "cliffhanger" and "fighter"—and his subject "misunderstood," "unknown," and "untaught," indeed an "orphan" (Dorson 1976c, 1–4; Dorson 1976b, 30; Dorson 1975b, 237). Declaring the urgency of American studies as a reform project in a troubled era and molding it after a consensus notion of the protean American experience, the movement pumped America as exceptional in the world, especially in its expansion and variety, its boldness on the frontier and fondness for new beginnings (Hacker 1947; Smith 1950; Mechling 1989d, 24; Kammen 1993).

Extending the idea of the emergence of a new American type, Dorson reflected on the creation through the Harvard program of a new academic type befitting a modernist generation breaking with European scholasticism and shaping a future from an American tradition. It was a type Dorson described as "having a certain flair that denotes a liberated spirit." "I think in terms of types," Dorson admitted, and the new academic type was willing to behold America broadly and positively. Dorson, the epitome of this type, was dissatisfied with the fragmentation of history and literature into minute specialties of period and area and was attracted to heated discussions among faculty and students about a new interdisciplinary conception combining history, literature, and culture that could grandly be called American civilization. "What they shared," Dorson marveled, "was a sense of
exhilaration of America as a civilization, and at possibilities of the intellectual
discovery of the meaning of America” (Dorson 1979, 369–70). To Dorson and oth­
ers in the early days of the movement, America was “exhilarating” and “astonish­
ing” (two favorite Dorson adjectives), for America held cultural riches of its own
and this awareness could be revitalizing for America’s sense of self. If American
history had been tardily found and inadequately taught, American culture still
awaited discovery, and it promised great, unique marvels along with a store of
dilemmas.

After receiving his undergraduate degree in 1937, Dorson moved to Vermont,
traveled, and thought about his future before he returned to Harvard to study with
a highly charged devotion to American studies. He reflected that he came back
energized by his reading of frontier humor and historic narratives of American
heroism that had spread through the country (Dorson 1937). It was “cultural” or
“folk” material that lay outside the purview of most academic history and literature
studies of the time. Yet to Dorson it helped explain America, and he became anx­
ious to study and teach it, and write about it. He joked that his freshly found enthu­
siasm for scholarship must have “confounded his professors” (Dorson 1941a, 509).
He wrote Howard Mumford Jones on February 8, 1938, “Last year when taking a
seminar with you in Southern literature, I chose for the subject of my paper, as you
may remember, ‘The Humor of the Southwestern Frontier.’ At the time you said,
‘What is the point of taking this when it has already been covered by Meine, Devoto,
etc.? I am now in a position to say that the field had by no means been covered and
in fact one of the most fascinating sources has been almost untouched.” That source
was folklore.

The new doctoral program that attracted him, the world’s first devoted to
American studies, was called the History of American Civilization, and Dorson
became the fifth student to receive the degree in 1943. He entered with the inten­
tion, he wrote in 1938, of “becoming a writer and critic of Americana.”5 His fellow
students included others who would later carry the American studies banner such
as Daniel Aaron and Henry Nash Smith. It was Smith, remembering Dorson’s work
on frontier humor, who suggested to him that he could study folklore with Celticist
Kenneth H. Jackson at Harvard. Dorson arranged for a reading course with Jackson
and chose folklore as one of his doctoral areas. From Jackson, Dorson became more
aware of comparative international folklore study and its analysis of folktale types
and motifs, and their diffusion. He followed this course with attendance at a sum­
mer folklore institute at Indiana University directed by Stith Thompson, at that
time a leading proponent of the “Finnish” historic-geographic method of compar­
atively analyzing international folktales. He also encountered anthropological
approaches, especially the idea of folklore as the mirror of a group’s cultural histo­
ry espoused by Africanist Melville Herskovits from Northwestern University, who
was a student of Franz Boas and was active in the American Folklore Society
(Dorson 1963b, 1971a, 18–21; Herskovits [1941] 1946, 1958).6 From American history,
then, Dorson took the nationalist vista of America as a civilization, and from folklore study he considered the internationalism of cultural diffusion and literary analysis.

As Dorson read more folklore scholarship, he attempted to reconcile the “paradox” that folklore studies should develop “most energetically” along national lines while by “its very nature” it “requires an international breadth of vision” (Dorson 1973c, 1; see also Montenyoh 1989). Following the work of Stith Thompson and Archer Taylor, he recognized that “the materials of folklore transcend all barriers of language and culture, traversing continents and spanning oceans in vast leaps and drifting across borders in easy stages. ‘Cinderella’ has circled the globe. The ‘Shanghai gesture,’ popular among American schoolboys as a thumb and finger waggle of derision, roamed all over Europe in the past four centuries. One extended family of water goblins unites the Japanese kappa with the Scottish kelpie. In ballad and legend, romance and epos, the same protean hero performs the same sequence of marvelous exploits. Proverbs and riddles glide from one tongue to another to settle comfortably in a new idiom” (Dorson 1973c, 1; see also Taylor [1931] 1951, 1972, 1985; Thompson [1946] 1977). “But,” he asserted, “the galvanic force behind concerted, subsidized, and firmly organized folklore studies is the force of nationalism.... The same impulses that have led to the self-study of national history and national literature have urged the pursuit of national folklore. Today the well-equipped political state possesses its accredited historical records, its approved literary masterpieces, and its classified folklore archives” (Dorson 1973c, 1).

In his dissertation “New England Popular Tales and Legends” (1943) Dorson brought an international and national perspective together to make a case for the transformation, indeed the exceptionalism, of American oral tradition from its Old World sources. Studying early New England storytelling culled from printed sources, Dorson separated the “comic anecdote and local legend, the tall story and trickster yarn” of New England from the myths, fairy tales, and sagas of Old World culture. He wrote: “Americans wove the fresh materials of their experiences and livelihoods into story stuff dyed with Old World supernaturalism and New World extravagance, and by the devious routes of folklore channels, stories passed into popular currency, and crusted into a traditional lore” (Dorson 1946b, 3). Thus a national cultural tradition was planted; it grew from the bottom up. Dorson published his dissertation as Jonathan Draws the Longbow in 1946 and dedicated the book to his American studies teachers at Harvard. Dorson made some scholarly impact with the book, for it was awarded the prestigious Chicago Folklore Prize. He began the book with a sentence that he would elaborate in a remarkable publication list comprising twenty-four books and over two hundred articles: “American culture, late to arise in the history of civilizations, exhibits a folklore with distinctive qualities” (Dorson 1946b, 3).

Dorson first stumbled onto folklore study, he said, “accidentally through an undergraduate paper on Mark Twain’s debt to the oral tall-tale tradition of the
frontier,” and he became so involved in the topic that he published excerpts from Davy Crockett’s almanacs in 1939 (Dorson 1937, 1939, 1971a, 4). That summer, he traveled around the country “on the trail of Paul Bunyan interest” and other American folk heroes, and met with the major folklorists and writers working in the field, including a core of scholars from New York State working to popularize American folklore: Benjamin Botkin, Louis C. Jones, and Harold Thompson (Dorson 1941a, 401). After publishing two articles based on his folk hero research in regional journals, Dorson received national attention from intellectuals in 1941 with an essay on “America’s Comic Demigods” in the highly respected American Scholar. Standing back from the American center, he claimed to be able to see whole, and objectively, rather than in a fragmented and biased perspective of literary scholars. It is worth quoting his opening lines for indication of later Dorson hallmarks: a provocative writing style often bordering on the grandiloquent, a faith in American exceptionalism, and a sharp jab at those who did not see things his way.

From a nation lean in folk annals and too short-lived to boast an heroic age there has suddenly sprung a knavish breed of blustering superheroes. Survey the American callings and the chances are you will find in each the same titanic character—whether hunter, trapper, flatboatman, cowboy, sailor, lumberjack, farmer, oil driller, iron puddler, wheatresher or hobo. This native portrait at once buffoon and strong hero, braggart and superman, joker and work giant, stands as America’s unique contribution to the world’s store of folklore. It is a strange snub by American literary scholars that they have been inclined to read in the comic demigod only an overblown juvenile fable. (Dorson 1941a, 389)

The essay included Dorson’s first debunking of the association of American folklore with Paul Bunyan. He thought that the popular fascination with Paul Bunyan was a sign of the growing dominance of mass media in twentieth-century communications as it took a booster role of forming an American superhero mythology. He exposed the “Paul Bunyan myth” as essentially “manufactured,” and he suggested that authentic legends of “American tradition” properly existed in the conditions of the nineteenth century when figures such as Mike Fink and Davy Crockett ignited an orally circulating legacy of earthy legends and tall tales. He used the term “American tradition” repeatedly to describe ideas and traits at the foundation of an American national character (see Wilson 1989). Dorson was careful to differentiate between folk tradition made up of recordable historic forms such as legends and folktales and an exploitable tradition conceived as a present-day spirit for which new Bunyanesque forms could be written. Dorson expounded that if an authentic folklore of recordable historic forms could be identified in the United States, American culture could stand comparatively, and proudly, next to the grand traditions of European nations and ancient civilizations with heroic ages. His hope was to raise the level of the American tradition to the
“dignity” of serious literature, to give recognition to an American heroic age. His evidence for this majestic epoch hinged on the recognition of legends about Davy Crockett during the nineteenth century as a national mythology (see Dorson 1942). Into the twentieth century, Dorson found cultural malaise as this mythology had been transmogrified by mass media and commerce. “For the present at any rate,” he concluded, “the Bunyans and Finks and John Henrys occupy a burlesque level, if an unerasable place, in American tradition—perhaps doomed for further indignities in the folklore of the comic strips, perhaps destined for immortality in the unwritten American epic” (Dorson 1941a, 401).

Dorson’s intellectual heroes in his campaign for studying the American tradition were crusading figures who forged new organizations or scholarly directions. They combined serious history and literary study into public notice of a “glorification of things American” (Dorson 1941b). In his early work, he often cited Moses Coit Tyler (1835–1900), founder of the American Historical Association and author of books on the literature of the new nation, who he religiously called “historian of the American Genesis.” Another favorite was Constance Rourke (1885–1941), author of American Humor (1931) and Davy Crockett (1934), who he thought had “ingeniously” and “brilliantly” traced folk themes in a national popular literature and made humor—usually taken lightly as entertainment—a subject of serious cultural inquiry. He saw his labor on top of this Americanist foundation to be the expansion of studies of social history and folk tradition past the eighteenth century into immigration, labor, and regionalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Stern 1989). To offset the risk of provincialism in American studies, he repeatedly called for an awareness of the international currents of folklore, and different national traditions of folklore studies (Dorson 1973c). He saw great promise in the engagement of empirical fieldwork to record authentic living traditions from the grass roots (Dorson 1971a, 25). If popularizing media and elitist literary scholars could not be trusted with getting American tradition right, then a new scholarship of American studies and folklore studies resting on the promise of social history and cultural fieldwork would.

After a year of yeoman teaching at Harvard, Dorson moved up the professor ranks in the history department at Michigan State University. He stayed for thirteen years before coming to Indiana University’s doctorate-granting Folklore Institute. With the presence of Stith Thompson and his student Warren Roberts, Indiana had been known as a center of philological analysis based in the library that involved searches for international origin and diffusion of folktales. Prior to coming to Indiana, Dorson had a conversion experience to fieldwork. Both history and literature which he had pursued at Harvard were based on the reading of printed texts mostly drawn from “the elite or intellectual culture” that “covers the small cerebral segment of the population” (Dorson 1971a, 91). He made his early employment of field collection of oral texts sound like a discovery of America, its real people, and its genuine cultural expression. “The folklorist,” he reflected, “is
crossing the square, or scaling the walls, that divide the book-learned from the tradition-oriented sectors of society, and in my foray into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 1946 I crossed the Straits of Mackinac by ferry to enter an uncharted world of folk societies. As I now realize, I could have found the folk anywhere, but at the time I needed a symbolic crossing in my voyage of discovery” (Dorson 1976b, vii).

With a fellowship from the Library of Congress for studies in the history of American civilization, he stayed “exhilarated and astonished” in the Upper Peninsula for five months in 1946. There he found living oral traditions that he had earlier assumed to be historical relics. He gushed that “the bards and troubadours of Homer’s day and King Arthur’s court were all there, reciting in a variety of American accents their wondrous sagas” (Dorson 1976b, viii). In folklore fieldwork, he thought he had struck the pure mother lode of popular, mass, and elite culture (Dorson 1971a, 90–93). Instead of reconstructing an evolutionary model of folk culture “at the bottom of American civilization,” and elite at the top, he relativistically set popular, mass, and elite cultures alongside one another with folk culture feeding them all (Dorson 1971a, 91).

In his classes at Michigan State, Dorson required his students to engage in fieldwork for living American traditions, as Jan Harold Brunvand recalled. He wrote of his course with Dorson in 1954:

Our term projects were huge grab bags of lore wrested from roommates, friends, and relatives; we tried to embellish them with as many comparative notes and Dorson-type field anecdotes as possible. Each project from the large class got a pointed witty commentary from the instructor and then went into the archives; that is to say, it was dumped into overflowing filing cabinets in the narrow hall leading to Dorson’s overstuffed office on the top floor of creaky old Morrill Hall. The major essay question for the final went something like “If your parents ask you what folklore is and why you were studying it, how would you answer them?” (Brunvand 1975, 15–16)

Brunvand recognized Dorson’s captivation of an audience with his storytelling. “The real guts of the course,” he said, “was the storytelling: encounters with the legendary Suggs, adventures in the Upper Peninsula, first-person reports about the exploits of Davy Crockett in the Heroic Age, duels fought with concocters and collectors of fakelore.” When Brunvand came to Indiana University in 1957 to study English, Dorson brazenly pressed him by asking, “what the hell are you doing as an English major?” Brunvand remembered that “his most convincing logical argument was that English majors were a dime a dozen, but that in a few years every university in the country would be clamoring for folklorists. But I think what really convinced me to switch was some wild stories he soon began telling about a meeting he had recently attended in Chicago where he did battle again with the demons of fakelore and cultists of the folksy” (Brunvand 1975, 15–16). Dorson viewed his students as missionaries for the cause and he annually reviewed his battles for a
national tradition based on a “genuine” folklore in a class for the folklore department he introduced, Folklore in American Civilization, which he cross-listed with history.

The Michigan experience “exhilarated and astonished” Dorson in other ways. He found a greater variety of ethnic, occupational, and native traditions than he had imagined in his literary work in New England. As a result, he altered his nationalistic view of American culture to take into account a communitarian view of ethnic and regional diversity. His answer was to tie a native and ethnic presence as threads in a weave of American culture. In his foreword to *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*, he observed that three great strands of “folk traditions of Indians, European ethnic groups and occupational workers” could be found in the formation of a national American culture. In any region of the United States, therefore, “fieldwork done in depth in a relatively limited area can illuminate the entire American scene” (Dorson 1976b, viii). Only in a limited area, he surmised, could a collector get an adequate representation of the traditions that represent culture. He urged a holistic approach that avoided the parochialism of concentrating on one group but saw the group as part of a historical process of “co-existing cultures” that came together within the American experience (Dorson 1961a). From this premise, he envisioned American folklorists’ mission: to compile a record of an America based on collections of focused regional-ethnic-occupational traditions. Rather than being connected to separate communities, these “diversified folk cultures,” he offered, were streams feeding into an American sea. In his words, they “contributed vigor and strength to American life” (Dorson 1976b, ix).

Dorson created a colorful picture of a collected America in 1964 with the publication of *Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States*. It contained “bona fide” stories and beliefs collected by individuals in their limited regional-ethnic-occupational fields, including Maine Down-Easters, Pennsylvania Dutchmen, southern mountaineers, Louisiana Cajuns, Illinois Egyptians, southwestern Mexicans, and Utah Mormons. He admitted that the work presented was an incomplete portrait and his introduction, “Collecting Oral Folklore in the United States,” urged a professional mission to record American traditions. Toward the end of life, he was still sounding this call and organized a meeting of folklorists in 1980 to prepare an encyclopedia of American regional folklore, but the project collapsed after his death a year later. Even in his last fieldwork-based book, *Land of the Millrats* (1981), he described his experience in the urban-industrial city of Gary, Indiana, as a “foray into ‘de region.’” Drawing parallels with *Bloodstoppers*, Dorson viewed the plural ethnic and occupational traditions of the “Calumet Region” of northwest Indiana, and reflected that “as a folklorist interested in regional theory and the common traditions shaping a region, I was intrigued by the notion of an urbanized region, seemingly a contradiction in terms, and one so self-aware that it pinned the label on itself. Had the Region generated a distinctive folklore within its boundaries and become a subject of talk and legends?”
(Dorson 1981, 2–3). It was a question he asked in equal frequency about the nation, for both region and nation represented to him the American social process of consensus from the mix of subcultures.

The idea of a powerful cultural center and unempowered periphery is significant to Dorson’s treatment of both folklore as a subject and folklore studies as an object. He argued for recognition of folklore’s move to the center of culture, where it objectively belonged as the root of cultural development, from the margins where elitist literary scholars had put it. He tied the relation of elite English emphasis in American culture with the control of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant scholars. His presentations argued essentially for the move of the “other” groups—ethnic, occupational, and regional—from which folklore is generated to the center of culture. He followed his regional study of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with two collections from African-American communities in Michigan and Arkansas (1956c, 1958). He argued there, in fact, that the American black narrative tradition was a new hybrid formed primarily from European and some African influences. Unlike other studies of tales that had been narrowly textual, Dorson gave special attention to the distinctive storytelling styles of black raconteurs. Accordingly, he also called for the disciplinary unity and distinctive style of the “mixed brew” of folklore studies from the margins to the center of scholarship. Even within folklore studies, he used this rhetorical strategy to show that while national and international studies could coexist, the former should be more central. The movement from the margin to the center is evident in his concern for entry into folklore studies. He wanted to know the path from which students came to his folklore center, and, in fact, his students produced a collection of anecdotes recalling their arrival from distant scholarly homes (Reuss 1975). Similarly, his “Theory for American Folklore” had as its prologue the search for a student from outside disciplines to an inside core of folklore studies (Dorson 1959b).

Dorson’s approach to the presentation, and professionalization, of folklore to the public was largely in response to two popular trends in American book and magazine publishing he held in contempt. One was the journalistic (he would say “juvenile”) rendering of regional and occupational folk heroes such as that done by writers James Stevens in *Paul Bunyan* (1925) and Frank Shay in *Here’s Audacity!* (1930). The other was the anthologizing of American folklore from literary sources into national celebrations of its native creativity such as *A Treasury of American Folklore* (1944) by B. A. Botkin and *The American Imagination at Work* (1947) by Benjamin Clough. Dorson often prefaced his criticism by claiming that he was not, *per se*, opposed to popularization, but he thought it could be done by academics eradicating, rather than stooping to, public ignorance.

Dorson implied he had a moral obligation to “call down” authors if they “are manipulating folklore simply to make a quick buck, and in so doing sacrifice their personal integrity” (Dorson 1959b, 238). Intellectually, Dorson objected to their often chauvinistic boosterism of an American character, misrepresentation of the
genuine American tradition in the reliance on "spurious and synthetic" literary editing, and cleansing simplification for children and general audiences.

Dorson detested the writers and editors of folklore for a popular market because they obscured the authenticity of folklore as social product of real-life common folk. He righteously declared that by rewriting materials they ruined the sanctity of the original document, thus detracting from the analytical use of the scholar and the dignity, indeed the social meaning, of the American epic. In a critique of the artistic quality of modern mass culture, he derided the work of popularizing writers and editors as commercialized "fakelore."

THE FAKELORE DEBATE

Dorson made a name of himself in 1950 with his introduction of "fakelore" in *American Mercury* (with a circulation of over eighty thousand). If not the largest magazine in America, it was one of the nation's most quoted and discussed (Spivak and Angoff 1944, 3). The publication had a lively reputation because of the previous editorship of H. L. Mencken and the contributions of renowned American writers including Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, Theodore Dreiser, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Among the authors of the 1920s publishing in *American Mercury* were artist-critics such as Benjamin Botkin developing a regional literature out of folk materials (Botkin 1926, 1935). During the 1940s the magazine regained prominence by publishing snappy literature by promising young authors, incisive cultural assessments of national arts, and anti-Communist essays that celebrated the American enterprise. Critic Marsha Siefert reflected that "the revival of the Mencken focus, with a new emphasis on the virtues and substance of America (rather than only its foibles), made it a natural home not only for pieces on American folklore of the kind that Dorson had already published, but also for contributions by young authors who had the kind of writing talent that Dorson did" (Siefert 1989, 64).

Dorson sought to infuse "daring" and "flair" in his historical writing, and he drew upon what he called the "artistic" models of his Harvard Americanist teachers, who he thought "not only explored, but contributed to, American mythmaking" (Dorson 1977d). Dorson believed that his colorful "Menckenisms" such as ringtailed roarers and whopper-mouthed woodsmen were more than enlivening prose for a general readership. Talking to me once about how intellectuals gain fame in a public, mostly anti-intellectual, culture, he remarked "notoriety goes to the coiners of terms." He elaborated elsewhere on his change of heart that led him to "abandon efforts at polite and decorous criticism and resort to forceful language": "American mass culture was highly commercial, blatant, loud, aggressive, and the book industry partook of these traits; in another age, say Victorian England, subtle thrusts might be appreciated, but in twentieth-century United States one needed to shout at the top of his voice" (Dorson 1976c, 7). The lack of
response to his understated reviews of Botkin’s *Treasury of New England Folklore* led him to think in terms of combining the loudness of contemporary mass culture with the flourish of British Victorian oratory and American grandiose talk. Despite his academic position, he was deliberately unacademically combative to give notice to the malaise of commercial culture and the scholarly seriousness of folklore. He imagined an American version of the controversies taken up by the “Great Team” of Victorian English folklorsists, as he dubbed them. He referred to their unrelenting debates and the ways that their arguments over theory and the meaning of folk tradition in an industrializing, civilizing world drew them respect as intellectual authorities (Dorson 1968). He admired the British folklorists for their oratorical flourish, their authoritarian air, and their societal importance. He would announce: “I yearned for a caustic critic—an Andrew Lang tilting at Max Müller or a Joseph Jacobs in turn jabbing at Lang, men who held the British public spellbound for four decades with the virtuosity of their debating skills” (Dorson 1971a, 51).

Dorson sought disputes to enliven scholarly discourse. As review editor of the *Journal of American Folklore*, Dorson invited Botkin to harshly review his *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*. He prodded Botkin on October 6, 1952: “This is not a peace offering; say what you please without pulling any punches. I am quite ready and anxious to have other points of view than my own represented in the review section, as long as they have some thinking behind them.” Thus Dorson promoted debate for its scholarly service in sharpening intellectual positions and standards, and he equally relished the public spotlight it could bring. As sport, raising controversy invited a match of rhetorical skills, and Dorson had great confidence in his abilities to triumph in defense of the unpopular position, especially since he thought of that position typically being the intellectual one.

Although Dorson often expressed admiration for the intellectual fervor expressed in the debates of the British folklorists, his polemics had an American reference. Discussing his choice of fiery words aimed at the popularizers, I recall him quipping, “This isn’t discourse, it’s combat,” and many of his terms describing the intellectual quarrels of the Great Team or his own debates were military references of “battles,” “barrages,” and “clashes” (see Dorson 1968, 1976c, 1–30). One can understand his adoption of military rhetoric from the journalism of World War II, and in his debates with the popularizers he raised the specter of attacking a totalitarian threat from mass culture. As orator and critic, he took the role of defender of democracy in folk culture against corrupting, expanding forces. In his rhetoric he implied analogies of the manipulation and dishonesty of a homogenizing mass culture with the totalitarianism of fascism. In the drama he staged with his early debates, the progressive voice of cultural democracy needed to triumph to save society.

Dorson’s first skirmish was over the authenticity of Paul Bunyan. By the 1940s, Bunyan’s spread in mass media as a folk hero had become a national phenomenon.
Bunyan's woodsman virtues of being kindly and down-to-earth, remarkably strong, fantastically large, and fiercely independent were often touted in the popular press and children's books as the substance of American character, especially in times of hardship such as the Great Depression and the World War (Shephard 1924; Stevens 1925, 1932, 1947; Wadsworth 1926; Bowman 1927; Rounds 1936; McCormick 1939; Turney 1941; Miller 1942; Untermyer 1946). In the fashion of creating an American epic hero, poets including Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and W. H. Auden (who wrote a libretto) latched onto the Bunyan figure (Hoffman 1952, 128–64; see also Morrissette 1932). They thought of Bunyan as a home-bred American folk figure inspiring the American spirit much as countries in Europe had their ancient national heroes. In Dorson's fieldwork with Michigan lumberjacks, however, he did not collect anything similar to the tall tale cycle concocted by Stevens, although he admitted that there may have once been a small kernel of oral tradition on Bunyan (Dorson 1941a, 393; Dorson 1951c, 233–35). “Lumberjacks did not tell Paul Bunyan stories,” Dorson asserted, “but they did relish anecdotes about sly and eccentric bosses” (Dorson 1976b, viii). And for Dorson the field-recorded item was the test of cultural reality. It represented the purity of the folk teller that rendered the authenticity of the relic past, he asserted, and in an academic manner could be analyzed, much as the historian's cherished documents, for the objectively determined pattern of American culture. Dorson was alarmed that popularizers had the power to create a tradition for the commercial present and obscure the truthfulness of the rough-hewn past. He resented the public association of what he considered a “sickly sweet” fabrication over the gritty social substance of folklore.

H. L. Mencken at American Mercury had originally published Stevens's stories of Bunyan in 1924, and in 1925, the commercial house of Alfred Knopf turned Stevens's Paul Bunyan into a hot seller and the most successful of the Bunyan books. Stevens claimed to have heard Bunyan stories in the lumber camps and to have embellished them to supply a quintessential American folk hero. His introduction offered the unsubstantiated origin of Bunyan in “a mighty-muscled, bellicose, bearded giant named Paul Bunyon” who participated in the French Canadian Papineau Rebellion against English rule in 1837. In Stevens's narratives, however, Bunyan's rebellion against colonial domination was replaced with support of American industry and capitalism. “History, industry, invention, and oratory were, to his mind, the four grand elements of human life,” Stevens wrote of the Americanized Bunyan (Stevens 1925, 225).

Stevens the writer had replaced the legendary quality of a localized Bunyan story told in a camp with national mythmaking. To witness this, judge Stevens's mythological narrative introducing the book: “This forest warrior, with a mattock in one hand, a great fork in the other, powerful as Hercules, indomitable as Spartacus, bellowing like a furious Titan, raged among the Queen's troops like Samson among the Philistines” (Stevens 1925, 1). Stevens gave the impression that
the stories in his book were taken from the lips of hearty lumberjack tellers. "This folk lore," he wrote, "survives as shining memorials to sturdier and nobler days. And the legend of Paul Bunyan is certainly the greatest of these creations; for it embodies the souls of the millions of American camp men who have always done the hard and perilous pioneer labor of this country. It is true American legend now, for Paul Bunyan, as he stands to-day, is absolutely American from head to foot" (Stevens 1925, 7).

During the 1940s American Mercury continued appealing to public interest in the courageous Americanness of colorful folk heroes with a Dorson essay on Sam Patch, among others (Dorson 1947). Unlike Stevens the creative artist, Dorson played the role of the historical detective finding a paper trail recounting mill hand Patch's dramatic jumps over Niagara Falls and other waterfalls, and uncovering legends that arose about Patch's life and fatal leap over the Genesee Falls in 1829. Charles Angoff, who had succeeded Mencken as editor of American Mercury, wanted, in Dorson's words to "keep some of the old fires stoked." By this he meant exposing "the fraudulent and perfidious" in a grudge match between accuser and accused (Dorson 1976c, 5; Siefert 1989, 68). It was also an issue that American Mercury and its readers took to heart because of the political importance of rendering a distinctively and authentically virtuous American tradition as the Cold War began. Dorson mentioned to me that Angoff's offer of a printed debate appealed to his competitive instinct honed on the squash and tennis court. Indeed, he drew attention to a head-to-head contest in a later essay by changing the "and" in the title between "folklore" and "fakelore" to the agonistic term "versus" (Dorson 1974a). He hoped to be the Harvard champion again, and send a stinging message that folklore, whether on the pages of a popular magazine or in the halls of academe, needed to be researched, not "written." Dorson further insisted that it needed to be analyzed "properly" by the university professionals acting as cultural interpreters for the public.

Angoff shared with many other editors the opinion that folklore had become by 1941 a national topic of conversation. Bunyan was a household word that cropped up in cartoons, advertisements, and magazine stories (Felton 1947; Hoffman 1952; Dorson 1956a). Many artists and writers used what they identified as folk themes to create a national epic. Stephen Vincent Benet gained fame, for example, for "writing" folktales such as The Devil and Daniel Webster (1937, adapted before the end of the decade into an opera, drama, and movie) and the renowned literary figure Carl Sandburg mined American folk idioms for a number of poems in The People, Yes (1936). Sandburg had also worked to popularize American folk songs and published arrangements in American Songbag (1927). Marking the bridge between artist and popularized scholarship, Sandburg wrote the foreword to Botkin's Treasury of American Folklore (1944) for the commercial house of Crown Publishers. In music, folk festivals such as the National, White Top, and Pennsylvania folk festivals drew massive crowds during the 1930s and "folk" singers
such as Bradley Kincaid, Leadbelly, and Woody Guthrie gained notoriety (Lawless 1960). In art, Thomas Hart Benton, one of the celebrated “regionalist painters,” captured folksy characters from American tradition in several well-publicized murals, including one for Indiana at the 1933 World’s Fair and another in 1937 at the state capitol of Missouri (Kammen 1991, 434–35; Benton 1983, 247–76).

Film producer Walt Disney created perhaps the biggest splash of folklore in mass media with the release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in 1937, his first animated feature. Based on an internationally disseminated folktale (Aarne-Thompson Tale Type 709) identified in Germany by the Brothers Grimm (no. 53), the Disney film turned the story into a highly stylized and hugely successful musical comedy. Disney followed this success during the 1940s and 1950s with several animated features based on Grimms’ collection and tall tales of American folk heroes including Johnny Appleseed, John Henry, and Pecos Bill. The popular press in New York sought out some academicians to comment on the phenomenon, and nearby folklorists active in the public spotlight such as Louis C. Jones and Harold Thompson were often quoted as folklore authorities (Kammen 1991, 432–34; Thomsen 1993). Angoff referred to this public interest in a preamble to the debate between Dorson and Stevens: “During the past two decades, the subject of American folklore has not only won the attention of more and more academicians, but has also won widespread interest among the general reading public. It therefore merits critical examination.” Angoff implied a struggle for cultural authority between the “professor” represented by Dorson and the “artist” defended by Stevens (see Davidson 1940; Brown 1946; Thompson 1951; Utley 1952).

In “Folklore and Fake Lore” in American Mercury, Dorson lumped together Stevens the journalist writer and Botkin the Ph.D. editor as despicable “commercializers” and “money-writers.” Bemoaning public ignorance of its own tradition on the one hand and berating its wretched exploiters on the other, he arrived clearly picking a fight:

In recent years folklore has boomed mightily, and reached a wide audience through best-selling books, concert and cabaret folksingers, even Walt Disney cartoons. But far from fulfilling its high promise, the study has been falsified, abused and exploited, and the public deluded with Paul Bunyan nonsense and claptrap collections. Without stirring from the library, money-writers have successfully peddled synthetic hero-books and saccharine folk tales as the stories of the people Americans may be insufficiently posted on their history and culture, as the famous New York Times survey indicated, but their knowledge of these subjects is erudition, compared with what they know about their own folklore. The saddest aspect of this fraud is that the spurious article is so dull and thin, and the genuine material so salty and rich. (Dorson 1950b, 336)

Especially explosive was Dorson’s charge of ideological manipulation. “These comic demigods are not products of a native mythology,” he acerbically wrote, “but rather of a chauvinist and fascist conception of folklore. They must be 100 per cent
Richard Dorson and the Great Debates

native American supermen, all-conquering, all-powerful, braggart and whimsically destructive. By such distorted folk symbols the Nazis supported their thesis of a Nordic super-race, and touted Hitler as their greatest folklorist” (Dorson 1950b, 336). Considering that the military and ideological campaign against Nazi Germany was still fresh in the public’s memory, Dorson’s melding of fakelore with fascism must really have hurt. Rather than the praise heaped on the rewritten Bunyan from literati and public alike, Dorson pummeled the popularized Bunyan as the worst of commercial and ideological exploitation. Bunyan provided Dorson a tie between Stevens and Botkin, since Stevens wrote “folklore” using Bunyan, Botkin anthologized literary stories of Bunyan as folklore, and Botkin’s *Treasury* was advertised as a “Paul Bunyan of a book.”

Dorson did not explicitly define “fakelore” in the essay, but he was dead sure about folklore’s meaning: “Folklore by any definition requires the proof of oral vitality” (Dorson 1950b, 336). With the value-laden term “fakelore” Dorson intended to cast aspersions on contemporary writers who tampered or misrepresented folklore in their entertaining stories. “My promulgation of the term ‘fakelore’ was intended as a shorthand attention-getter to make people aware of a difference between bona fide and phony folklore,” Dorson later recalled (Dorson 1974a, 59). He contrasted the negative intentionality of “fake” with the “folk,” or analytical use of print sources “in which folk traditions have found lodging more or less accidentally and casually” (Dorson 1972g, 465). After all, he had mined printed nineteenth-century newspapers for his *Jonathan Draws the Longbow*, but he argued for this work as a form of naturalistic fieldwork “to provide historical antecedents for contemporary specimens of oral and material culture” (Dorson 1972g, 466). He could allow that classic American writers such as Hawthorne and Irving had adapted “folk themes,” but their writing should not be confused with the performance of folklore (Dorson 1971a, 186–203). Dorson viewed their literature as a historical artifact of cultural process, as opposed to contemporary anthologizers and journalists who misrepresented literary works as the stuff of folklore—and the basis of American culture. Using the tone of a moral play, Dorson set folklore as the true cultural expression of sincere, hardworking folk and fakelore as the commodity of devious and greedy exploiters. Dorson made the judgment that fakelore, if not exposed, would take a reprehensible life of its own and eventually obliterate all attempts at saving the pure strains of genuine American tradition. He lambasted authors and artists as charlatans who would steal for cheap profit and misrepresent for hurtful propaganda the cultural property of humble, unsuspecting tellers.

After use of “fakelore” caught on, Dorson clarified his meaning of the term as the presentation of “spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore.” He allowed “fakelore” to become a single term, although originally he had meant it to be intentionally separated into “fake” and “lore” as opposed to the united, historical “folklore.” Dorson did not deny Stevens’s right to create stories in the style of folktales, but he insisted on distinguishing between the
historically "real" oral accounts of folklore and the fictional lie that his literature was in itself folklore. He resented retellings of folklore as distracting the appreciation of everyday tradition bearers and undermining the "serious" investigation of folklore as a cultural mirror. His argument for authenticity hinged on the ironic categorization of mass culture as anti-cultural. In Dorson's sense, culture had an organic meaning in that cultures grow from the expressions of groups tied to place and community. Dorson detested that folk tradition had been made into entertainment in contemporary society instead of a part of the everyday life of ordinary people which he associated with "culture." Dorson implied that academics had to be culture's intellectual defenders against "popular taste" engendered by the dulling force of mass media and its commercializing agents in contemporary life. Assessing the situation as another American exception, Dorson thought that there appears to be no close parallel in other nations to the fakelore issue in the United States, where popularization, commercialization, and the mass media engulf the culture" (Dorson 1976C, 14, emphasis added).

Dorson turned the charge of fakelore into a cultural critique of the anti-intellectual and pro-ideological effect of American mass media. He warned that the temptations of commercialism and mass media diluted the "salty and rich" core of American folklore and detracted from the essential message of its glorious earthiness. Concerned for preserving the American historical spirit of "democracy," reflected in the varied and vernacular social spirit of American folklore, Dorson resented that Paul Bunyan had been turned by media into a triumph of American industrialism rather than a reference to a living tradition of lumberjack legends criticizing camp bosses and their corporate management. He further pointed out a fondness for erotic themes in folklore in the living tradition as opposed to the bowdlerized family entertainment of folktales produced for the mass media. The connection of these charges for Dorson was that the democracy of folklore meant that culture would be seen as it was found, in all its vernacular reality, and it signified a middle ground, objectively above ideology, or at least between right and left. Dorson, the realist academic, claimed to speak for the integrity of folklore and its powerless tradition bearers, since they were chauvinistically and commercially manipulated in the media, and it was this exploitative "manipulation" that Dorson hammered time and again.

Dorson burned another Bunyan editor, Harold Felton, with rhetoric even more acidic than that hurled at Stevens. Reviewing Legends of Paul Bunyan (1947), Dorson stabbed the book and the mass culture of which it was a part in one stroke:

This anthology of the literature that has grown around Paul Bunyan exalts still further the nation's leading fake-hero. It testifies to the gullibility of the public, the irresponsibility of publishers and editors, the timidity of folklore scholars, and the dismal insipidity of some American writers. Here is no excusable Ossianic lie, with a witty fraud and a poetic talent to palliate the act. Here is chiefly ignorance, commercialism, and the shoddiest of
creative power. The surest proof that most of these “legends” are not folklore lies in the puerility; no self-respect folk would pass them on. (Dorson 1951c, 233)

Dorson implied that scholarship did not serve a degrading master, but as merchandise folklore was subject to popular taste, akin to the rule of the vulgar mob. The mob could be forgiven for its ignorance, he intimated, but what he could not allow was that it was manipulated or controlled by conniving media and commercial elites who sought to change thinking and obscure the grit of vernacular tradition. Thus Dorson harped on the “fabrication” and “manufacture” of Bunyan, and he explained that the Bunyan fad signified a “cultural adolescence in the American nation, which has grown up on Greek and Roman and Norse gods, and now feels a childish glee in discovering its own homemade, all-conquering deity.” Preferring the social reality of vernacular texts, Dorson trashed the Paul Bunyan phenomenon as “safe, harmless and patriotic stuff. Nothing in the legends can offend, save their banality, for all the juice has been extracted” (Dorson 1951c, 234). Dorson’s command for a proper handling of the Bunyan phenomenon was to first folkloristically uncover the early oral tradition or historically show the rise of Paul Bunyan in American popular entertainment (see Hoffman 1952). Instead, he complained, readers got an “omnibus” in which “all types of Bunyan writing are piled together, whether the plain, anecdotal yarns of Charles E. Brown or the overblown whimsy of Mr. Stevens, so long as they deal with the mammoth kitchen or upside down mountains” (Dorson 1951c, 235).

Dorson contemptuously called Stevens “a badly mixed up man” and accused him and his ilk of passing off their vapid creations as the voices of the folk. He implied that Stevens lied about his sources and misrepresented his background in the storied environment of the lumber camps. In Dorson’s biting words,

In an expanded introduction to a new edition of his book, he [Stevens] squeals at the Ph.D.s and professors who ask him for documentation. Then he admits spending three years looking for some, in vain. He now mentions six story-tellers by name, and a “hundred” others anonymously, but gives no texts. He says that his Paul Bunyan is the real McCoy, but that he invented most of it. He accuses other authors of stealing his legend—which he has assigned to all America—even if they heard it from jacks, for the jacks read it in his book. I would like to meet the lumberjack who would recite such stuff—or any novel—aloud. He calls himself a “timber beast and sawdust savage,” and writes fluff. (Dorson 1950b, 337).

The barbs must have cut Stevens, and aroused readers of American Mercury, as a classic battle between critic and artist turned into a debate about the future of American culture and the value of spreading mass media. But while Dorson and Stevens were sharply divided on the value of creatively presenting folklore in contemporary popular culture, both agreed that Bunyan should not be used for “chauvinist” or commercial exploitation to boost a blind patriotism or culturally false
tourism. Dorson admonished that Stevens’s “invention” should not be called folklore because folklore had a scholarly, and therefore authoritative definition. To Dorson, Stevens did not collect, or write, folklore; he concocted insipid “fluff” not worthy of the public attention it received. Stevens testily answered that as an artist he could alter what he wanted to produce a creative work for the public, and Dorson could study his unaltered texts as he wanted for a different, specialized audience. For Stevens the spread of Bunyan in mass media invigorated modern culture with art, built an appreciation for forestry, and raised the vernacular voice of forest “poesy” into respectable poetry. Stevens defended his genuine experience with the oral tradition of lumbermen by recounting his life in the woods. Stevens wrote:

I swing on Dr. Dorson’s charge, “Stevens is a badly mixed up man [on Paul Bunyan],” and bat it right back at him. His confusion is between the tasks of the anthropologist and those of the artist with folklore…. The scientist of long technical training and experience will use folklore to reflect vital phases of human tribes in times past. The artist adopts folklore for the work of his imagination. He sees Paul Bunyan as substance for art, in the tradition of Twain with King Arthur’s court, of Byron with Don Juan, of Marlowe with Faustus, of Homer with Odysseus. On that great way I make my trifling tracks. (Stevens 1950, 343–44)

If the argument sounds petty, remember that as a struggle for authority over public consciousness, the stakes in the debate were substantial for the period. Modern scholar and artist scrapped for oversight over American tradition.

Stevens’s categorization of historian Dorson as the anthropologist may appear surprising, but Dorson’s argument for the social group basis of culture sounds anthropological and, considering his background, at times startlingly antinationalist. It is also true that at the time the antifascist, sociocultural line had been strongly voiced by anthropologists such as Franz Boas and many of his students who used folklore to show the cultural relativity of tribal and minority groups (Barkan 1992, 66–95; Herskovits 1953, 86–101). Boas, had, according to George Stocking, transformed the conception of culture away from race and nationality to “the burden of tradition, and to the processes of human reason” (Stocking 1968, 233; see Boas [1928] 1986, 1940). So when Dorson made pronouncements in “Folklore and Fake Lore” such as “There is no such thing as the lore of the nation, or of regions, but only the lore of the groups,” he may have indeed sounded to Stevens like a Boasian anthropologist (Dorson 1950a, 342). This view merits some explanation, since Dorson never considered himself anthropological or antinationalist. What appears to be a contradiction is a result of Dorson’s brew of history and folklore in forming his view of national tradition. History, organized nationally, taught Dorson the influence of the developing political nation–state in the life of its residents (Stern 1989). He would indeed argue that the environment and experience of New World settlement especially transformed American life into a unique culture rather than consisting mainly of altered transplants of Old World traditions.
Folklore, Dorson understood, crossed national lines and connected narrators with groups. He edited the Folktales of the World book series and the anthology *Folktales Told around the World* (1975) with this view in mind. When arguing solely for folklore, then, he could sound internationalist or diffusionist. On his folklore fieldwork in the Upper Peninsula, for example, he could comment, "Folk traditions follow their own courses much like parallel railroad tracks which never meet," implying that each example of folklore has its own life history and varied group associations (Dorson 1976b, 7). But when added to the background of history, which tended in his mind to be traced to national movements, then the picture appeared more nationalistic. In writing up his fieldwork for *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers*, Dorson overlaid national history upon the anthropological idea of folklore in culture to come up with a communitarian reconciliation by combining the cultural "minuscule" with the historic "region" and "nation." He declared, for example: "the Peninsula contains in minuscule the nation’s varied folk culture. A dramatic century of land and water conquest, of mining and lumber booms, has generated a rich historical and local lore" (Dorson 1976b, 2).

One may also evaluate Dorson’s apparent backtracking on the nationalist line by considering the folklore genres with which he was preoccupied. At the time Dorson studied folklore, a great concern spread among "comparativists" such as Stith Thompson and Archer Taylor for charting from literary analysis the diffusion of folktale motifs and types from source areas around the globe. Boasian and Malinowskian anthropologists meanwhile recorded myths from so-called primitive groups to determine their reflection of a society’s particular cultural history and the social and psychological function of those myths within the society. Dorson’s interest since his undergraduate days had been largely in legend because of its narrative based on historical events and figures of community, region, and nation. Besides criticizing the historic-geographic literary scholars and cultural anthropologists for their indifference to legendary material, he bemoaned a lack of attention to living traditions such as jokes and anecdotes among modern occupational groups such as college students and steel workers (Dorson 1949, 1981). When he referred to folktale or myth in his work, as he did in "Folklore and Fake Lore," he tended to take more of an internationalist or comparativist tack. When he brought up legend, occupational narrative, or humor, it tended to be in a historical and frequently nationalistic light (see Dorson 1973a, 1976b). And it was the study of legend, occupational narrative, and humor against the background of American history that Dorson especially relished as revealing social life. As if to show the possibility of using folktales for nationalist interpretation, he interpreted national characteristics of Japanese folktales in a book on folklore and nationalism (Oinas 1978). “Anyone speaking of national characteristics depicted in folktales treads shaky ground,” Dorson recognized, but he thought, “Japan offers as strong a case as may be found anywhere” (Dorson 1975d, 241). Significantly, Dorson in Japan and America stuck to an emphasis on the text and its types, rather than the particularistic social group, to
be able to show the ways that texts can become both varied and shared within a regional, urban, and national whole.

Dorson never reprinted "Folklore and Fake Lore," although he published two books of essays in which fakelore was a central theme. He indicated to me that the charge of Nazi fascism was overheated and the nationalistic theme understated for his later sensibilities. He reprinted "Fakelore," a reflective review of the issue first published in Germany in 1969, in *American Folklore and the Historian* (1971). He closed the essay with a much stronger call for a historical search for national tradition than he made in "Folklore and Fake Lore":

Fakelore was intended as a rallying cry against the distortion of a serious subject. It seems almost incredible that such elementary principles as the necessity for fieldwork and the faithful rendering of texts had to be debated. It all goes back to the curious lack of specialization in American folklore, which fell into a no-man's-land between comparative folklorists and scholars in American studies. To overcome this lack of any body of theory fitting the needs of the United States, I presented two lengthy papers to the Society, "A Theory for American Folklore" (1957) and "A Theory for American Folklore Reviewed" (1968). In essence, this theory holds that the folk traditions of countries colonized in modern times—in North and South America and Australia—must be correlated with their major historical developments from colonization to industrialization. (Dorson 1971a, 14)

Dorson even declined to reprint the original essay in a book entitled *Folklore and Fakelore* (1976). Instead, he introduced the book with a new essay, "Folklore, Academe, and the Marketplace," another review of the issue with an update of new battles since 1969. The thrust of his later argument hinged more on the position of an intellectual class toward the commercial or mass culture. In his summary of "Folklore and Fake Lore," he ignored the questions of chauvinism and nationalism raised in the original essay, and recapitulated the tone of the piece as an attack on the temptations of the popular marketplace to distort genuine folklore. The significance of the original essay, Dorson told readers, was that "this exchange presented for the first time the clash of viewpoints between the academic (the Victorians would have said scientific) folklorist and the [commercial] writer using folklore themes" (Dorson 1976c, 5).

Dorson disdained extremist uses to which folklore could be put from the left as well as from the right. During the 1970s, he responded to leftist critics who skewed his *America in Legend* for omitting ethnic folk heroes and heroines and for exalting the bloodthirsty Indian-killer Mike Fink as a legendary hero. "Fink and Crockett were indeed violent and even racist personalities," Dorson replied. "Still, to invent substitutes for them merely produces a new fakelore" (Dorson 1976c, 27). During the Cold War of the 1960s he raised this concern for ideological control of folklore in his public objection to Soviet governmental reins on folklore scholarship (Dorson 1976c, 71–72).
Dorson appeared much more forgiving of uses of folklore for “cultural” rather than “ideological” nationalism, especially when they resulted in political independence of a minority group or the unification of culturally connected people. Thus he set the work of the Brothers Grimm as the “reconstruction of a proud Germanic past,” and the ways that folklorists in Ireland “all fought for the revival of the Gaelic tongue and heritage against the stifling cloak of English culture” (Dorson 1976c, 67–70). In the United States, he considered the pressures of “official” ideology and government less pervasive than the temptation of popular taste, which as he said, “contains its own latent ideology” (Dorson 1976c, 72). He implied that this ideology of popular taste in commercial culture is anti-intellectual or professional, capitalistic, and hegemonic. To the criticism that Dorson’s championing of “professionalism” was elitist and conservative, Dorson responded that he preferred to call it “the search for truth and standards of excellence” (Dorson 1975b, 237–38). From his perspective, American folklore scholarship should serve neither the right nor the left, and in setting the middle course, he imagined an objective, essentially positivist handling of folklore so that intellectuals could rationally interpret culture and guide the public’s cultural knowledge (Dorson 1951c, 234; Dorson 1957).

Jay Mechling commented further that Dorson’s choice of the “middle way” lay in “the consensus school’s claim [of] ‘givenness’ of American experience, in contrast with Europe’s reliance on ideologies.” The claim to givens of American experience, it can be argued, follows American philosophical emphases on pragmatism, flexibility, and realism, and Mechling cites Dorson’s intellectual comrade Daniel Boorstin as a main proponent of this view (Mechling 1989d, 22). In fact, Dorson avoided using ideological or theoretical “isms” (and he vowed to never, never use the charged term “paradigm” that had come into vogue among radical historians) in his rhetoric. He surveyed folklore studies as a whole many times with reference to various “theories,” but pragmatically preferred to describe “techniques,” “directions,” and “concepts” that in the name of disciplinary consensus would bring together diverse viewpoints (Dorson 1951b, 1951a, 1959c, 1963a, 1969, 1972b, 1982b).

Dorson thought that Botkin’s nonmethodological treasuries were antithetical to the rational scholar’s agenda. “Patchwork catch-alls,” “haphazard scrapbooks,” and “scissors and paste jobs” Dorson called them. He cursed folklorists who would defend the treasuries as somehow constituting a model of research, and he dismissed writers who gave positive reviews to the anthologies as obviously having little or no background in American studies (Dorson 1971a, 27). The treasuries further represented to Dorson a dangerous combination of chauvinist nationalism and pandering commercialism. Introduced by Botkin as a book “as big as this country of ours—as American as Davy Crockett and as universal as Brer Rabbit,” the Treasury of American Folklore sold over a half-million copies in 1944 and was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. It went into numerous editions
and led to a whole bookshelf of other "Treasury" volumes. Stevens also had a negative opinion of Botkin's treasuries, but for a different reason. Speaking as an artist, he thought that Botkin's literary choices should have been better. He wrote: "Most of the pages of his Treasury represent little more than the whimsies swapped by drugstore cowboys and the printed maunderings of the boozy hacks who infested the Frontier, from Cumberland Gap to the Golden Gate.... His book reminds me of the squirming mass of worms to be dug from the right spot behind any rotting, abandoned barn" (Stevens 1950, 349).

Dorson decried Botkin's confusion of folklore in literature with folklore in the field and Botkin's resulting misrepresentation of national tradition as overly Anglo-Saxon and refined. Dorson ridiculed Botkin the editor-folklorist as "the dude fisherman who buys his catch at the market" (Dorson 1950a, 338). Because Botkin did not record his fieldwork, Dorson claimed, "he gives us not close-ups of story-telling action or folk societies. Because we cannot trust them, we never are sure how much is real tradition, or what has been left out. I can testify that his bulky collections graze the country's folklore wealth" (Dorson 1950a, 338-39). Essentially, Botkin had included material that Dorson considered folksy rather than folklore. Dorson accused Botkin on the one hand of loosely using the omnibus "American" label to succeed at the "box office," and on the other hand, of creating a false and overly glorified picture of America that smacks of "exclusive nativism."

To Dorson's way of thinking, the anthologizers stretched the "term folklore out of all meaning, and shrink the definition of American to old stock Anglo-Saxons" (Dorson 1950a, 338). Promoting an image of America with diverse communities acting together in a cultural process of consensus, Dorson asked why immigrant and Indian traditions were left out of Botkin's treasury and why historical social differences among classes and regions of America were not represented in folklore collection. To answer these crucial questions, Dorson sounded a call for a library of in-depth field collections of communities similar to his Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers "gathered and interpreted with insight, integrity, and some sense of social meanings" (Dorson 1950a, 343).

Readings of Botkin's essays without taking into consideration their different social vantages during the 1950s might suggest that he and Dorson really were not that far apart on the need for fieldwork, or the issue of representing the pluralism of American traditions in ethnic, occupational, and regional communities, or even the matter of a historical national tradition (Botkin 1946a, 1949a, 1962; J. Hirsch 1987). A veritable gulf existed between them, however, concerning the public presentation of folklore and the uses or "applications" to which folklore is put. Botkin poetically sounded the call of a humanist for "folkness," the use of traditional ideas which could invigorate mass culture through creative artists, while Dorson insisted on folklore's treatment as a precious historic artifact whose form needed to be kept intact to keep its original cultural integrity and scientific value (Botkin 1931, 1932; Dorson 1957). As an oral artifact, folklore for Dorson gained definition; it
took on reality as a cultural form. Its sincerity and authenticity could be set in con­
trast to its other, commercial mass culture.

It bothered Dorson that Botkin was vague, even evasive, about folklore’s objec­
tive place in culture. Botkin felt uncomfortable with folklore’s “esoteric associa­
tions” and ambiguous connection with a distant past (Botkin 1932). While Dorson
was sure about the definition and need for “folk” and “folklore” as keywords neces­
sary for discourse about community and expression, Botkin seemed ambivalent
about them, since as scholarly inventions, he argued that they seem “to have
become the possession of the few who study it rather than of the many who make
or use it” (Botkin 1944, xxi; see also Botkin 1932). If Dorson found Botkin’s pop­
ulist presentation of literary retellings in the treasuries culturally and historically
abhorrent, Botkin viewed Dorson’s presentation in Bloodstoppers as boringly
inventorying trivial “survivals,” rather than showing the creative power of folklore
as “humane learning” (Botkin 1952b, 1955b). The principle that Botkin stuck to
since the days of editing Folk-Say remained: “There is a point where collection and
classification, with all their superstructure of definition and analysis, break down
and creative (including re-creative) interpretation must begin. Not what is the folk
and what is folklore but what can they do for our culture and literature is the ques­
tion that should concern our writers and critics” (Botkin 1930, 17).

Dorson’s swipe at Botkin was a bold professional move. Fifteen years Dorson’s
senior, Botkin had been president of the American Folklore Society (1944), had
founded and edited the annual Folk-Say, had a best seller to his credit in the
Treasury of American Folklore (1944), and had respected posts teaching at the
University of Oklahoma, and directing the Federal Writers Project folklore pro­
grams and the Library of Congress’s Archive of Folk Song. Botkin championed
work in the American folklore field and was chosen to write the definitive survey
of “American Folklore” for the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and
Legend in 1949. Dorson had first met Botkin in 1939 and kept up a friendly corre­
spondence. Botkin praised Dorson’s volume on Crockett, and Dorson in turn
worked with Botkin on a proposal for a book on tall tales of American folk heroes
for a series Dorson planned on American Folk Literature. On July 6, 1939, Botkin
wrote Dorson to encourage him: “The function of such a series, I agree with you, is
to introduce to a wider public the native literature of the folk order, which has
value for the scholar as well as interest for the general reader.”9 Dorson advised
Botkin to organize the industrial, occupational, and urban lore collected in
Chicago and New York by the WPA project for the book, but plans for the book
stalled when Botkin could not get permission to publish the material. Dorson
expressed his disappointment about the project’s demise when he wrote Botkin on
January 21, 1940, but offered that “personally, I do not consider the negotiations a
loss, since they gave me the opportunity of becoming acquainted with you.”10

Dorson and Botkin were both Harvard alumni (Botkin earned his B.A. in 1920,
but rarely referred to it; Dorson often did) and Jewish ancestry (Dorson rarely
Benjamin Botkin working at the Archive of Folksong (now the Archive of Folk Culture), Library of Congress, c. 1945. (Special Collections, University of Nebraska)
referred to it; Botkin often did). Botkin had come from working class roots in Boston while Dorson grew up in bourgeois comfort in New York City. Botkin was known for his shy and quiet ways, while Dorson was outgoing and outspoken. They also differed in their curricular focus and extracurricular activity. Dorson the intense sports competitor embraced history and American civilization. Besides studying for the M.A. in English from Columbia, which he received in 1921, Botkin wrote poetry, “communed with nature,” and found employment in New York City settlement houses and English and Americanization classes for new immigrants (Botkin 1935; Jackson 1966, 2–3). After his social work experience in New York City, Botkin returned to academic studies at Nebraska, where he studied folklore with Louise Pound and produced a dissertation on the American play-party song, for which he received the Ph.D. in English and anthropology in 1931 (Botkin 1937).

Following the success of the first Treasury volume in 1944, Botkin resigned from the Archive of Folk Song to write and edit full time in New York, helped by prestigious fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1951, and later the Louis M. Rabinowitz Foundation (1965) and National Endowment for the Humanities (1967). He was a major star in the firmament of folklore studies. Indeed, reverence had been paid to Botkin’s treasuries in most reviews by folklorists until Dorson expressed mild criticism at the end of a review of Treasury of New England Folklore in the magazine Saturday Review of Literature (1948): “The chief complaint I am making is that Mr. Botkin is trying to present a full body of regional folklore without benefit of field work” (Dorson 1948a, 9). According to Dorson, within the folklorist fraternity the review was considered “devastating,” not only because Botkin was a respected authority, but also because folklorists were expected to support their own in public outlets to attract adherents to the subject (Dorson 1971a, 6). Dorson thought the subject could be better served through imposition of scholarly authority, and he faulted folklorists generally for inadequately defining their field, surveying its terrain, indicating its problems, and explaining its discipline (Dorson 1948b, 76).

When it came time to scorch Stevens’s Bunyan for American Mercury, Dorson turned up the heat on Botkin, who had anthologized six literary renderings of Bunyan in Treasury of American Folklore and written on Bunyan as the epitome of an American folk hero (Botkin 1946b). Once again Dorson faulted Botkin for not doing fieldwork and reporting, essentially, the wrong stuff as folklore. Dorson caustically wrote: “His Anglo-Saxon sources provide an endless suffocation of tall tales and gags, but not a single instance of the blood-stopping charm, or the dialect yarn, or the personal saga—since these are unreported forms, though widespread, known only to the folk” (Dorson 1950a, 339). These were also forms collected together by Dorson in Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers, and they suggested the uncensored reality of grassroots folklore. Dorson fretted that Botkin’s selections showed “the tough folk mind a thing of gossamer and ribbons” (Dorson 1948b, 76). Botkin returned that Dorson was guilty of “harping on the more lurid and violent aspects” of life and overblowing “discoveries” of unartistic, trivial survivals (Botkin 1952b).
Dorson’s strident accusation against Botkin of chauvinistic English-American nativism must have especially stunned Botkin, since he was known for liberal views on American pluralism, and in his Federal Writers’ Project he had promoted special fieldwork attention to living traditions of ethnic and occupational groups (Botkin 1946a, 1946b). Dorson went after the Federal Writers’ Project manuscripts Botkin used in *A Treasury of New England Folklore* as “for the most part disappointing and amateurish, devoid of milieu and commonplace in content” (Dorson 1948b, 76–77). Dorson’s most crushing blow against Botkin in the essay was that Botkin could not distinguish genuine folklore or else had sold out his values for the devil’s money. “Mr. Botkin defines folklore, fairly enough, as ‘the stuff that travels and the stuff that sticks;’ but this is not the same as the stuff that is shoveled together to fill a bargain volume,” Dorson snorted (Dorson 1950a, 339).

If Dorson was retaliating for Botkin’s criticism of Dorson’s *Jonathan Draws the Longbow* in 1947, he did not say. Botkin had dished out the same complaint that Dorson later leveled at Botkin: he had not done fieldwork. Botkin wrote that Dorson unfortunately “by-passed (to use his own term) ‘direct oral sources,’ except for a few introductory generalizations on oral story-telling habits and an occasional reference to oral parallels or variants.” As a result, he does little “to illuminate the actual influence of print on the folk tale but rather confines his attention to the mutations of tale types and motifs on the single level of print” (Botkin 1947a, 79). In fact, Botkin also accused Dorson of neglecting the cultural background and “living tradition” of the region, yet another charge that Dorson later shot back at Botkin. It must have irked Dorson that Botkin also considered Dorson a fellow “treasure-digger,” who had helped to break down “the resistance of purists in the fields of both literature and folklore who refuse to regard folklore as worthy of literary scholarship or literary folk tales as worthy of folklore scholarship” (Botkin 1947a, 79). Dorson made sure that no one would confuse his work with Botkin’s.

Dorson was especially savage in his review of Botkin’s *Treasury of Southern Folklore* (1949). “Mr. Botkin’s gift, it would seem, is for the vapid and inane generalization,” Dorson screeched (Dorson 1950c, 481). Damning the book as a “rehash of rehashes,” he warned that the stories edited by Botkin “are excessively flat and dull and badly written, besides having nothing to do with folklore.” Dorson charged that Botkin had stooped degradingly low to “meet the taste of the modern reading audience”:

[Robert] Chambers and [William] Hone [Victorian British antiquarians] made mental demands on their readers; Botkin makes none, and caters to his audience much as do newspapers, digests and omnibuses, with short, breezy selections, good for a laugh or a human-interest angle, that also appeal to superficial regional patriotism with familiar names and places: anecdotes of Lee, Andy and Stonewall Jackson, Huey Long, hillbilly stories, Confederate sagas, Negro dialect jokes, flotsam about the old plantation, cotton, moonshiners, the Mississippi, New Orleans cookery—something for everybody, and what drugstore bookbuyer will cavil at disparity of sources or the many removes from oral tradition? (Dorson 1950c, 482)
Botkin’s treasuries drew Dorson’s ire because their popularity implied a successful standard of scholarship. He did not want them to be the works from which judgments of folklore scholarship or American tradition would be made. Dorson railed that they “lessened the prestige of the study in the eyes of scholars in other disciplines.” They showed little fieldwork, elementary library research, and were “unmindful of folklore’s relation to culture in time and place” (Dorson 1950c, 482). The Treasury became symbolic in Dorson’s mind for the incoherence of the discipline and the trouble with mass culture. In an example of his using the subject of folklore to represent the object of folklore studies and American civilization, Dorson bitterly commented that “Burgoo” would be a more apt term than treasury for Botkin’s anthologies: “Burgoo” is a dish “neither liquid nor solid, neither soup, hash, nor goulash, but partook of the nature of all of them” (Dorson 1950a, 354). He chided other folklorists for attaching folkloristic merit to this kind of work or approving of the popular attention to folklore the volumes brought.

Looking back over the first Treasury, one can find the phrases that made Dorson bristle early on in the introduction. Botkin wrote:

When I began to think of a book of American folklore, I thought of all the good songs and stories and all the good talk that would go into it, and of what a richly human and entertaining book it would be. A book of American folklore, I thought, should be as big as this country of ours—as American as Davy Crockett and as universal as Brer Rabbit. For when one thinks of American folklore one thinks not only of the folklore of American life—the traditions that have sprung up on American soil—but also of the literature of folklore—the migratory traditions that have found a home here. (Botkin 1944, xxi)

In the volume, Botkin stressed the aesthetic and entertainment value of folklore rather than its cultural roles. Although he recognized “migratory traditions,” he chose to stress “the English idiom in the United States,” not for nativistic purposes, so Botkin wrote, but for “practical purposes.” He felt that a book of “folklore in America” would be too unwieldy and he preferred the “unity” that resulted from concentrating on “American folklore” “as an expression of the land, the people, and their experience” (Botkin 1944, xxiv).

To be sure, Botkin began his treasury with American bravado. His first sections are mostly literary retellings of legends regarding “Heroes and Boasters,” such as Crockett and Mike Fink followed by anecdotes of “Boosters and Knockers.” Parts three and four concern “Jesters” and “Liars” and contain entertaining jokes and tall tales, including comical “yarns” about Paul Bunyan. Parts five and six have migratory folktales, songs, and rhymes, including African-American animal tales, British-American ballads, and children’s lore. Overall, the contents of the volume give the impression of defining through literature an American tradition of legendary hyperbolic characters and events, although as Dorson pointed out the historical, social, or cultural connection of these characters and events is not clear. However disappointing to Dorson the objective historian who recorded events
and texts as they were, Botkin's purpose was ultimately aesthetic. Botkin made selections that he considered artistic examples of indigenous traditions that could inspire creative work in contemporary culture. Botkin wanted "to show both the discrete and the discursive folk imagination at work" (Botkin 1944, xxv; see also Clough 1947). The key to the volume's significance, and ultimately the real bone of contention for Dorson, then, was its popular service "as an inspiration and a source-book for writers, teachers, and all others who are concerned with the materials of an American culture" (Botkin 1944, xxvi).

Rather than defend the treasuries, Botkin answered a year after Dorson's review in *New York Folklore Quarterly* with a plea for ending the mudslinging so as to improve folklore's public image. Invoking the cultural center in calling for "a little Christian civility," Botkin announced that "it is high time that folklorists realized that their internal squabbling and bickering, accompanied by much backbiting and sniping and open display of ill temper and bad manners, are doing their cause more harm than good, as far as the general public is concerned" (Botkin 1951a, 78). Thereafter Botkin refrained from engaging Dorson in public or reviewing his books. Well after Botkin had published his last treasury, Dorson was still unremitting in blasting away at the anthologies in many surveys of the discipline through the 1970s. The folklore debate spread beyond Botkin and continued long after the early round of essays during the 1950s, and in folkloristic discourse generally, Botkin's treasuries became the ultimate symbols of besmirched "popularized" tradition (see Dorson 1974a, 1976c, 1-30; Bluestein 1994).

Dorson thought that the assault on folklore and popularizers was necessary for raising the integrity of folklore as well as folklore studies in the public eye. The issue became a theme running through several presidential addresses and major sessions at the American Folklore Society (Utley 1952; Halpert 1957; Dorson 1968). Francis Lee Utley in his presidential address of 1951 commented that "nothing has disturbed your president more in this year of his ritual passage than the disintegrative quarrels which make our Society function at only a small fraction of its potential" (Utley 1952, 111). Utley wanted the American Folklore Society to be inclusive and make it a home for popularizer and scholar alike. Dorson wanted to coldly drive popularizers out of the organization since membership implied credentials as a cultural authority. Dorson insisted that the fight needed to continue to set the public straight on the genuine article of folklore and the standards set by scholars for its study (Dorson 1957).

**The Applied Folklore Debate**

It may appear that the "war of the folklorists" or the "battle of the books," as Botkin referred to it, was a personal tiff, but the fact that so many figures claiming cultural authority got into the act and the arguments continued for so long shows a broader significance. It related folkloristic discourse to the rise of mass culture
alarmingly witnessed during the post-World War II decades (Botkin 1952a). Dorson's answer to a sense of contemporary cultural malaise was to find long-standing "authentic" folklore from the grass roots. It served as alternatives to mass culture in subcultural persistence and the independence of traditional forms from the past into the present. He suggested intellectuals as custodians for this tradition and universities as repositories for its study. In contrast, Botkin's message resonated with the promise of an engulfing mass culture enhanced by a sense of tradition in new guises.

Botkin's ideal "culture" and definition of democracy were at odds with Dorson's. It is from this difference that the larger meaning of their debate for their times can be drawn. Whereas Botkin spoke of culture as activity in contemporary society, as an ongoing process of popularization, Dorson tended to refer to culture by its historical forms shared locally and communally. Botkin wanted to invigorate "modern life" and its popular expressions of literature and broadcast media with the imaginative appeal of folklore. His goal was thus to create an "applied" folklore for use in society which he contrasted with that of the purist who serviced his or her discipline.

Writing on the "Folkness of the Folk," Botkin referred to folklore as an answer to modern cultural malaise:

The ultimate aim of applied folklore is the restoration to American life of the sense of community—a sense of thinking, feeling, and acting along similar, though not the same lines—that is in danger of being lost today. Thus applied folklore goes beyond cultural history to cultural strategy, to the end of creating a favorable environment for the liberation of creative energies and the flourishing of the folk arts among other social, cooperative activities. In a time of increasing standardization it becomes an increasingly important function of the applied folklorist to discover and keep alive folk expressions that might otherwise be lost. And in a country of great regional diversity such as ours, the balanced utilization of regional as well as ethnic resources is vital to the enrichment and fulfillment of American life and expression. In this way the folklorist may outgrow the older "survival" theory of the "partial uselessness" of folklore and renew the continuity and survival values of folklore as the "germ-plasm of society." (Botkin 1962, 54–55)

In answer to Dorson's call for academic authority, Botkin argued that "whereas a pure folklorist might tend to think of folklore as an independent discipline, the applied folklorist prefers to think of it as ancillary to the study of culture, of history or literature—of people" (Botkin 1962, 50). For "restoring the sense of community and continuity to modern life," and "in securing and making available socially and artistically satisfying examples and versions of folk expression," therefore, "the folklorist should take the initiative," which meant participating in and creating new forms of popular culture (Botkin 1962, 55). Folkloristic initiative, Botkin contended, included reading folklore to children in elementary schools, writing new literature based on folklore, and promotion of folk festivals,
all in the name of creating “understanding and enjoyment”—a favorite Botkin phrase (Botkin 1953). The folk festival, for example, he called “an important form of utilization and application, for understanding as well as enjoyment, through participation and the celebration of our ‘commonness’—the ‘each’ in all of us and the ‘all’ in each of us. For what we participate in here is not only a performance and a revival but cultural—intercultural—democracy” (Botkin 1962, 51). Botkin’s *Treasury* was applied folklore, because it showed the ways that hidden treasures of folklore for stirring imagination had been used by writers in the past, and the ways they could be applied to a new “machine age.” Botkin liked to explain his use of folklore as subject and object by the double meaning of “folklore in the making” to refer to his treasuries. By this he referred to the cultural process of folklore, its shifting back and forth between oral tradition and print, or broadcast media, and its renewal by creative artists in popular, repeated traditions (Botkin 1938; 1944, xxv; J. Hirsch 1987, 26).

What was positively “folklore in the making” for Botkin was negatively “fakelore” for Dorson. Botkin emphasized in the *Treasury of American Folklore*:. If this book is intended to bring the reader back to anything, it is not to the ‘good old days’ but to an enjoyment and understanding of living American folklore for what it is and what it is worth” (Botkin 1944, xxii). This intention for reinvigoration of popular culture through creative applications of folklore and folkness became repeated in the many popular *Treasuries* by Botkin and others that followed, often loosely organized around regions and localities (see Botkin 1947b, 1949b, 1951b, 1954, 1955c, 1956; Botkin and Harlow 1953; Ausubel 1948; Tidwell 1956; Life 1961).³

For Dorson, “living traditions” meant a continuity of form from the past. Like Botkin, he recognized folk traditions in urban centers, in industries, even in mass media. Like Botkin, Dorson emphasized the pluralism of groups—ethnic, occupational, and regional—of which folklore played a major role. Dorson was stricter than Botkin, however, in his view of the oral vitality and social connection of folklore, and he had more of a methodical historical approach to tracing a group’s traditions (Dorson 1946a, 1961b; Botkin 1940, 1955a). Assessing “Folklore in the Modern World,” for example, Dorson differentiated between authentic and spurious “updating” of traditions:

The Davy Crockett who was a living legend in the 1830s and 1840s resurfaced a century later as a Walt Disney boy scout with no folk roots. In our time the cowboy has become a subject for popular films and recordings rather than a dispenser of anecdote and folksong. Meanwhile the youth culture has generated a lively druglore and rock festival scene attuned to the vibrations of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the themes in this new druglore can be recognized as time-honored in tradition—for instance, the battle of wits between the stupid ogre and the underdog trickster, here represented by the narcs (narcotics agents) and heads (consumers of marijuana and LSD). As Hartland said, tradition is ever being created anew. (Dorson 1976c, 47; see also Dorson 1973a, 257–303; 1978d, emphasis added)
Dorson's folklore came from a genuine social folk, who he first defined as community groups and later as “anonymous masses of tradition-oriented people” (Dorson 1976c, 46). He made a further distinction between the official culture of corporations, universities, media, and arts that dictate rules and the unofficial culture in which tradition-oriented people find their own modes of expression (Dorson 1976c, 45). Traditions to Dorson were living in the sense that they were continuous in form or function for the cultural process of a social folk.

For Botkin traditions were living in that they could be adapted by the official culture for aesthetic and educational uses. While Botkin also believed that folklore arose from the cultural process of groups, he embraced an idea of “folk-say” which extended folklore in print and other mass media to revitalize popular culture (Botkin 1931; J. Hirsch 1996). It included “literature about the folk as well as the literature of the folk” (Botkin 1962, 52). As his friend Bruce Jackson reflected, Botkin “refused to distinguish between what people wrote, what happened in a movie, and what was said on a street corner. For him, the stuff and process of folklore were truly protean. Not in the academic’s limited sense of an item’s being able to move from place to place and redaction to redaction, but in a profounder sense: from words in air to words on a page and back out again, from one kind of meaning here to a vastly different kind of use there, from one kind of use here to a radically different kind of use there” (Jackson 1986, 29). Living traditions, then, were creative adaptations to the present applied for future use. Botkin presented the axiom that “for every form of folk fantasy that dies, a new one is being created, as culture in decay is balanced by folklore in the making” (Botkin 1962, 50). He explained that revivals (unorganized and organized in local and national folk festivals) and local renascences (working from above downward) were all part of “folklore in the making.” Botkin therefore made less of a distinction than Dorson between folk and popular culture and showed less concern for the historical development or international spread of folk themes.

Botkin argued that the goal of folklore study was its “utilization” to aesthetically and emotionally stimulate the human spirit or to remedy social problems. This was in contrast to Dorson’s intellectual goal of building scholarship. Dorson was to Botkin the “purist” oblivious to society’s social progress. In Botkin’s words:

Utilization adds one more string to the folklorist’s bow. And since the word folklore already means both the material studied and the study itself, it is time we had a term like applied folklore to designate the use of folklore to some end beyond itself. To some end beyond itself, because any one who does anything with folklore, from the original folk singer or story-teller to the scholar, is using it. But as long as the folklorist stays inside folklore and regards it “from the point of view of folklore itself,” he remains a “pure” folklorist. It is only when he gets outside of folklore into social or literary history, education, recreation, or the arts, that he becomes an “applied folklorist.” (Botkin 1962, 50)

Following his use of folklore to combat fascism, Botkin turned the attention of applied folklore during the 1950s with the polarization of the world into
American and Soviet blocs. Botkin’s alarm about the tension of the Cold War came through in his call for applied folklore to further intercultural understanding (Botkin 1953, 1962). He disconcertedly wrote: “At this moment in history, when the creation of understanding in the world community is essential to survival, students and users of folklore and the folk arts must become ‘members of the whole world’…. It seems clear that as ‘members of the whole world’ folklorists have a stake in culture and in the world community, and it is up to them to make themselves heard in the councils of cultural strategy, or else—. But there must not be an ‘or else’” (Botkin 1962, 55).

Dorson’s answer to Botkin and other “activists” on applied folklore for a long time was firm: “I contend that it is no business of the folklorist to engage in social reform, that he is unequipped to reshape institutions, and that he will become the poorer scholar and folklorist if he turns activist” (Dorson 1971b, 40). I do not believe that Dorson meant to sound heartless; his tone spun off from his signal protection of the integrity of the academic enterprise. Writing on “Applied Folklore,” he posed the question, “How can the scholar, and especially the folklorist, remain aloof and uninvolved in the face of the world’s tragedies and crises, and inequities near-at-hand that he directly perceives?” He answered:

Well, in my view he is very much involved, simply as a folklorist. Look what an impact upon the landscape of learning the folklorist has already achieved—not nearly as considerable as he would wish, but still a sizable dent. This is where I see the folklorist playing his activist role: within the university arena, where he must bring all his energy, persuasive powers, and political acumen to bear if he is to defend, explain, and advance his subject. Folklore studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have done more than any other field of learning to bring attention to the culture of the overlooked sectors of the population. No subject is more humanistic, more people-oriented than folklore. Today the folk narrator and bard have won recognition in books, sometimes as their author, in recordings, and even on the documentary screen. This is the achievement of the folklorist, in which he can take pride. By teaching, studying, collecting, and writing about folklore, the scholarly folklorist is making a noble contribution to man’s knowledge of man. And these activities will absorb all his skills and strength. If he wants to divert them into a reformist role for which he is not equipped, he will succeed neither as a scholar nor as a philanthropist. (Dorson 1971b, 40–41)

For Dorson, “fighting the battle of fakelore” was his involvement as an educator in the world’s problems rather than his application as a folklorist (Dorson 1971b, 42). The organization of folk festivals and the study of the folk, he argued, are worlds apart, and the former properly belongs to the shady entrepreneur, the latter to the enlightened scholar (Dorson 1971b, 41).

Dorson’s last published survey was kinder to applied folklore, if it was conceived as “public folklore” (Dorson 1982b). He recognized the spread of “public folklore” as a respectable term and a job description for academically trained folklorists in a bicentennial afterglow he characterized as a “folklore boom” (Dorson
"Public folklore” at least reinforced separation from the private realm of authentic cultural production and equally private orbit of academic study. He noted the establishment of the American Folklife Center, Smithsonian Institution’s Festival of American Folklife, and state folklorist programs as prominent examples of the quickly growing public folklore movement involving professional folklorists. He helped perpetuate the fable that Henry Glassie, then a renowned university professor, had been the first state folklorist. Accordingly, he thought “public folklore” could be an adequately neutral term that allowed for a conception of a scholarly role in the public sector. He had, in fact, accepted a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for a public folklore project called the “Indiana Communities Project,” involving technical assistance by folklorists for community heritage programming. Dorson approved of the way that communities initiated the projects, however, rather than folklorists dictating the application of their study. He reiterated his concern for “fidelity to tradition,” including ensuring “the authenticity of the performances and craft demonstrations” at festivals and fairs.

Dorson reflected that public folklore “can lead into a new form of fakelore, or it can substantially enlarge the audience for the genuine values of folklore” (Dorson 1982b, 103). The elder Dorson uttered his warning as a vibrant generation of academically trained folklorists had gained employment in the public folklore movement, and sought to serve the causes, among others, of cultural conservation, social reform, and community enhancement. If they mostly followed Dorson in rejecting Botkin’s treasuries as the route to go for public folklore, it is also true that Botkin’s views on applied folklore reemerged positively in many public forums (Widner 1986; J. Hirsch 1988; Jones 1994).

Dorson’s battle with Botkin and Stevens was one of many through his career where he entered the public realm to take on the commercial popularizers and collaborating scholars. He became engaged in a debate in the pages of Atlantic Monthly with Maine writer John Gould defending his professorial representation of Down Easters' folklore. He hurled criticism at Eliot Wigginton’s journalistic Foxfire program of involving schoolchildren in oral history and folklore collecting in their communities (Dorson 1973d, 1974c; Wigginton 1974; see also Clements 1996). He envisioned problems in maintaining scholarly standards and recording the saltiness of genuine folklore in an elementary education project with journalistic rather than folkloristic goals. He took Foxfire to task for spreading “the old romantic stereotype of folklore as associated with primeval mountain people tucked in the hollers and secluded from the modern world” (Dorson 1973d, 157). Foxfire exalted the folksy, rather than the folk, Dorson implied. He also criticized the Ford Foundation for not consulting folklorists before deciding on the merits of the projects for funding. If it had, it would have acknowledged a need for a “science of folklore,” “where the guilds are powerful and the public defers to their expertise” (Dorson 1974c, 158). Dorson reiterated that the folklorist needed to be “concerned with truth and knowledge as opposed
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to falsification and error, with the distinction between folklore and fakelore” (Dorson 1974c, 159).

Wigginton defended Foxfire’s collections as “absolutely accurate—the result of careful fieldwork and the verbatim testimony (via tape recordings) of hundreds of informants in the field” (Wigginton 1974, 37). He insisted that depictions of Appalachia such as that of Aunt Arie, who did not have television or running water, in Foxfire were part of the social reality, rather than romanticism, of the region. Then he shot back that Foxfire projects did not have to conform to folkloristic standards to accomplish its educational goals of involving schoolchildren in their own culture. He pounded Dorson for not involving his Ph.D.’s in the social relevance of high schools and public projects. He wound up his defense with the offensive stance that

if, in the end, the project still does not measure up to the academic criteria laid down by the gods of folklore, that’s just too damn bad. My primary concern is, has always been, and will remain not with whether or not some Beta Club students will go on to college knowing exactly how the professional discipline of folklore works, but whether or not my high school kids will make it through high school at all, and what stance they will eventually take toward the dying, exploited communities they live in. And I would challenge some of those Ph.D. folklorists to get out here in the mud and get their diplomas dirty and pitch in where they can really do some good instead of sniping at little folks from the safety of their certificate-lined walls. (Wigginton 1974, 39)

Dorson retorted that he had every right as an academic folklorist to “snipe” since Foxfire purported in its grant to the Ford Foundation to collect and publish “folklore.” Dorson insinuated that Foxfire had shamefully profited from false pretensions of conducting serious folklore research. He pointedly wrote: “Mr. Wigginton may not have intended to get into folklore, but he is in it up to his ears and his Foxfire books are influencing many Americans. It is he who is playing god as the oracle of the folk” (Dorson 1974c, 39). Dorson accepted Wigginton’s invitation to come to Rabun Gap, Georgia, to observe the Foxfire project and Wigginton came to Bloomington to engage in what Dorson termed another “Great Debate” (Dorson and Carpenter 1978, 7; Wigginton 1978). Dorson softened a bit after crediting the values that Foxfire sought to “implant and develop were indeed ... the humane and traditional values that our study of folklore would reveal” (Dorson and Carpenter 1978, 7). He suggested several ways that folklorists could indeed cooperate with educators to produce honest and useful Foxfire-type projects. Wigginton followed by inviting Dorson to write on the standards of folklore scholarship in one of the popular Foxfire books (see Dorson 1977e). Dorson nonetheless complained afterward to students that the noninterpretative thrust and romantic impulse of the Foxfire books had not changed. “Popularization finds its gullible publics,” he sighed.

Ideological uses of folklore occupied Dorson even more than popularization during the politically charged 1970s. He took on the New Left in 1970 at the
Richard Dorson and the Great Debates

American Historical Association, and reviewed the proceedings in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* (Williams 1975; Dorson 1975b). Resenting the American academic neglect of class struggle and cultural hegemony, the young rebels criticized the consensus model of a national cultural democracy as perpetuating Cold War delusions and social prejudices, and they assualted Dorson's preoccupation with professionalism as creating an hierarchical, elitist superstructure. Dorson's self-image as a liberal fighter against the university establishment and popular commercialism collided with the New Left assertion that Dorson's cant of professionalism promoted "conformism at home and imperialism abroad" (Williams 1975, 228).

Dorson responded to his New Left critics with "shock" at being categorized with "establishment figures." He saw in folklore studies progressive forces for participation of women and minorities within society and appreciation for the cultural integrity of communities and their "common man, the people, the folk." Restaging arguments for American studies during the 1930s, Dorson iterated that "folklorists have had to fight, and still fight, for every inch of recognition.... My own sense of the battleground is that the cause of folklore studies must be fought primarily within the universities. The rigid departmental structure of the American university is the bastion that must be scaled" (Dorson 1975b, 237, 239).

Dorson stood firm in defending the nonpartisan search for truth by proclaiming that "folklorists, on the whole, did not commence field investigations with a-priori assumptions of the folk, whether liberal, conservative, radical, populist, or whatever" (Dorson 1976c, 23). In fact, he emerged from the debate with the observation that much common ground existed between him and the New Left historians in the folkloristic attention to the cultural and historical dimensions of ordinary folk (Dorson 1976c, 23–24). But some of Dorson's activities in the name of professionalism irked proponents of the New Left. He used his presidential address to the American Folklore Society in 1968 to answer Soviet communist criticisms of his "pragmatic historicism" or "bourgeois" nationalist views on folklore as "reactionary" (Zemljanova 1964; Dorson 1971a, 62–64; see also Klymasz 1976).

Dorson engaged in Cold War rhetoric to encourage Congress to counteract Soviet uses of folklore by continuing funding of educational projects in folklore as part of the National Defense Education Act (Dorson 1962; see also Fife 1961). He appealed to Congress: "Trained folklorists can expose the Communist use of folklore behind the Iron Curtain and within the labor unions in the democracies" (Dorson 1962, 163). Embittered by the trivialization of funded folklore projects in the *Wall Street Journal*, Dorson rose to say, "The kind of stereotyped and uninformed thinking that links folklore with church music can cripple the efforts of the free world to combat the communist states, who know well how to reach the hidden millions with the shrewd manipulation of folklore, legend, and myth" (Dorson 1962, 164). His words drew the notice in 1969 of Indiana University student radicals who singled him out in an editorial as an academic "prostitute" for
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seeking funds from the federal government fighting a barbarous war in Vietnam (Dorson 1976c, 340). Yet Dorson testified against the formation of a federally funded American Folklife Center within the Library of Congress because he feared it would “propagate” official versions of folk culture under a governmental imprimatur (Dorson 1971b, 41; see also Coe 1977; Cantwell 1991).

While the source of many of Dorson’s new detractors came from the Left during the 1970s, especially as youthful rage built up at home during the Vietnam War, Dorson saved one of his fiercest charges during the 1970s for the right-wing politics of Duncan Emrich. Emrich had a career of national service, frequently connected to the nation’s capital. After receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1937, where he studied under George Lyman Kittredge, he went into the military and took several diplomatic posts. He worked in Army Intelligence, and served as a member of General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s staff (McNeil 1996b). He went to the United States Information Agency, and from 1953 to 1955 he became a celebrity with weekly radio broadcasts about folklore for NBC. Like Ben Botkin, Emrich had been chief of the Archives of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress (1945–1955) and had published several popularized anthologies of cultural texts with whimsical titles such as The Nonsense Book (1970), The Hodgepodge Book (1972), and The Whim-Wham Book (1975). Although many of Emrich’s volumes were general works on American tradition, Emrich’s specialty was on the romance of the American cowboy and the American West in folk song and poetry. When he was a professor at American University, he produced a celebratory anthology, Folklore on the American Land (1972), aimed at the general public with the goal of increasing “awareness of our greatness and goodness as a people.” Against the background of social protest during the Vietnam War, Emrich closed his preface by declaring, “I love my country and its traditions, and I happily and without apology wear my heart upon my sleeve for them” (Emrich 1972, xi).

Emrich supported Dorson’s opposition to the American Folklife Preservation Act which proposed creating a federal office for folklife programming. But Emrich’s tone dismayed Dorson. Emrich saw a communist conspiracy infiltrating government. He wrote Dorson on May 22, 1970:

I am most fearful of the possibility that the Lomax/Seeger/Joan Baez et al. ilk will move in on a superb institution like the Smithsonian. Just as they are at the moment hoodwinking the Hill. I think that we are in very perilous times, and that these characters are chief contributors, working slowly from a point at least twenty years ago. You will recall that Pete Seeger took the 5th amendment at least twice; that Alan Lomax stayed out of the country for three years during the existence of the McCarran Act; that Sing Out follows the communist party line, and leavens it with the real folksongs in order to “excuse” themselves. I am close to it here, and it literally frightens me.

The same letter applauded Dorson’s use of fakelore and added that singers like Seeger and Baez were “phony folk,” “riff-raff running up and down the land and
appearing at ‘folk festivals’ as ‘folksingers’ or on college campuses as ‘folksingers’.... And we have vicious phonies like PS [Pete Seeger], JB [Joan Baez], and others who use the ‘folksinger’ bit to promulgate leftist (communist) propaganda quite true. As you know. And we might circulate whatever you may wish to write simply to test those who have or do not have the guts to stand up for our great traditions.” Despite their common concern, Dorson distanced himself from Emrich by publicly pinning the fakelore stigma on him.

Writing in Western Folklore, Dorson blasted Emrich’s appeal to the “romantic, chauvinistic, anti-intellectual consumers of fake folklore.” Dorson excoriated Emrich for omitting any traditions that did not glorify America. He sarcastically wrote: “The examples are wonderfully jumbled together, across the centuries and across the country, as if American folklore were one big homogenized stew” (Dorson 1973e, 141-43). Sounding pluralist calls for social reality, Dorson wanted to know where “ethnic folklore, obscene folklore, black folklore” were in Emrich’s “big package.” Emrich had, in fact, deliberately downplayed the impact of immigrant traditions, insisting that American folklore “should be a leveler, a freer, a common denominator, and not a divider or separator” (Emrich 1972, x). Commenting on the separation of black folklore in other collections, Emrich blithely offered: “I was brought up in New England, to me all these things were American” (Emrich 1972, x).

Dorson had no patience for Emrich’s “patriotic fervor,” his “sentimentalities about the American heritage” and “Eisenhower syndrome.” He assailed Emrich’s “sleazy formula” and “attempt to capture the all-American market (folklore properly collected and analyzed is regional and local)” (Dorson 1973e, 151). To Dorson, Emrich’s volumes were worse “gimcrackery” than Botkin’s treasuries because they seemed even more of a hodgepodge with “no underlying philosophy or theory, not even any folk.” Dorson summed up: “This is not the fakelore of tampered texts but of ideological selectivity. In place of the class protest fanned by fakelore on the left, we have here a sugary unity promoted by fakelore on the right” (Dorson 1973e, 142).

Dorson used his scathing review of Emrich to show at least one New Left critic his defense of the truth against manipulation from both the right and left (Dorson 1975b). In declaring that folklore should not be tainted by commercial culture and ideology, he stuck to his guns throughout his life, and he understood the implication that “scholars often respond to the psychic pressures of their time as supinely as do the popularizers, and will manipulate folklore, and history, to support their biases” (Dorson 1976c, 27). He somehow believed that his own work was above ideology or the new nationalism into which he came of age.

Jay Mechling recognized Dorson’s ideology as a member of the New Class which arose dramatically after World War II in America (Mechling 1989d, 24–25; Berger 1979). By this analysis, as the American economy moved from industrial production to consumerism, a New Class based on control of information wedged into the power held by the old middle class based in business and industry. Many children of
ethnic and working class parents were attracted to informational professions in 
academe, government, law, and media because, besides being seen as open fields 
demanded in a growing, diversifying society, they carried an association with 
achievement of intellectual merit rather than connections of family and money. 
Even so-called bourgeois children learned this lesson, since money could make 
them economically comfortable but not necessarily socially acceptable in a power 
establishment (Hertzberg 1989, 330–31). To this class, the available, righteous path to 
having credentialed status in America lay in education and communication, for 
they provide forums for an objective demonstration of ability and competition of 
ideas rather than the patronage of privilege. Dorson’s rhetorical coupling of 
“integrity” with “scholarship,” and “exploitation” with “commercial [culture]” and 
“chauvinistic [ideologies]” bear out such New Class values.

New Class values also came out in Dorson’s veneration, especially in his 
American Civilization class, of Vernon Parrington’s *Main Currents in American 
Thought* (1927–30), for the way it characterized American intellectual history as a 
struggle of rational intellectual values of progress and democracy against com­
cmercial interests of acquisition and domination. In Parrington’s narrative, the 
struggle culminated in the contemporary critique of industrialism and the old 
middle class (Parrington 1930; see also Dorson 1946a, 95; 1971a, 55).16 Indeed, the 
New Class in its celebration of the intelligentsia often countered the commercial 
values of the old class and its claim to power with liberal, centrist attitudes toward 
building an inclusive, humanitarian society (Hertzberg 1989, 264–75; Hollinger 
1975). If the rhetorical move of having an “ignorant” public or “commercial” sector 
granting authority to universities as a merit-based organization of expertise sug­
gested a hierarchy of power, then balance might be claimed by insisting on the 
egalitarianism and rationality within information organizations as a model for 
society.

The New Class revised the narrow republican image of America to allow for 
varied experience in a broadening of cultural possibilities (Hollinger 1975). 
Cultural pluralism and social democracy were appealing, if incomplete concepts, 
then, for they understood the need of new and marginalized groups to have legit­
imacy in a national consensus. The trade off for many of the ethnic intelligentsia 
was that they accept assimilation in the drive toward professionalism (Hollinger 
1975). A secular cosmopolitanism arose in which intellectuals often wrote as “gen­
eral Americans” or embraced social scientific pursuits such as psychoanalysis and 
cultural history built on ethnic concerns (Hertzberg 1989, 264–75). Or, as in the 
case of Alfred Kinsey, “his own liberalism was grounded in the conviction that 
nothing human should be alien to the realm of science” (Morantz 1977, 564). 
Mechling observed in Dorson’s case a similar position for rational objectivity as a 
“defense of the new center of the culture—namely, the New Class—and his view 
of pluralism-in-microcosm … [serving] the class’s ideology” (Mechling 1989d, 
25). In the New Class exchange of information for status, claims to scientific and
technical expertise, the objectivity of standards and achievement, and the rhetoric of professionalism became paramount in imagining a nonideological, rational society (Mechling 1989d, 25). Traditions still mattered, but were viewed as belonging to the old ethnic and occupational communities from which the New Class came.

The old communities received sympathy from New Class scholars as representing the spirit of cultural democracy. That spirit reinforced the right of New Class to rise into prominence over the privilege from above of old money and family title. Sympathetic to the folk because it had been overlooked and underestimated, New Class rhetoric expressed admiration for the folk’s integrity, honesty, and social reality. The New Class showed its ability to rise socially and achieve power by education and control of information. The combination of sympathy for social reality and drive for middle-class mobility became translated into a liberal “cosmopolitanism.” David Hollinger explains the cosmopolitanism of the New Class as one in which “particular cultures and subcultures are viewed as repositories for insights and experiences that can be drawn upon in the interest of a more comprehensive outlook on the world” (Hollinger 1975, 135).

THE NATIONALISM DEBATE

One of the “comprehensive outlooks” noticeable in the post-World War II years is the emergence of a revised nationalism. Propagandists drew American nationalism during World War II as a patriotic devotion to moral democracy over immoral fascism. The factions of America indeed needed to be united to fight as a nation. The popular press hailed the uniqueness of the American character reflected in folk types of bold, adventurous heroes on the frontier and in current battles. These heroes were thought to be “democratic” because they symbolized the shared trait of American commonness—whether urban, rural, ethnic, or religious. Other phrases of the period expressed this commonness: “American dream,” “American creed,” and “American way of life.”

If America, then, was not based on one national ancestry or main occupation, it could stand for certain ideas and values, the most important of which seemed to be democracy. Philip Gleason added that “democracy was thus more than a political system or an institutional arrangement: it was a way of life” (Gleason 1984, 353). If America was to build a moral difference with the scourge of Europe, both from the right and the left, then another component had to be the uniqueness of an emergent, democratic American culture, defined by a loose conception of a consensual whole drawing on social commonness and variety. In the new nationalism, devotion to the democratic nation-state is dedication to its ideas, for unlike totalitarianism or communism, democracy allows for participation of different views and ways of life. The nation-state affords its citizens freedom to live as they pleased (ironically, this praxis of freedom expressed as “this is a free country” often constitutes the
"American way of life"), but when the nation-state calls on its citizens to help beat back a threat to democracy, its citizens are obliged to follow and unequivocally support its effort. So the wartime message went.

American studies during the 1950s contributed to conceptions of the American character in the "myths, symbols, and images" that Americans owed to their historical and cultural experience. Under the guise of replacing ideology with an intellectual search for patterns in the American historical and cultural experience, Dorson's colleague at Harvard, Henry Nash Smith, especially touted the prevalence of the "Myth of the Garden," of America as an abundant new land that gave rise to new traditions and possibilities (Smith 1950). Smith thus explained that America could indeed be socially diverse and owe to European settlement, but have intellectual coherence. Central to the revised intellectual concept of nationalism was "culture" or "civilization." Both terms suggested something large and complex, expressive and ideational. Boasian anthropology informed the popularity of culture, although in American studies "culture" became broadened to expressions of shared ideas that went beyond small, bounded communities tied to place and ethnic tradition. If America had a separate history from its colonial settlement to the founding of the republic and the emergence as a powerful nation, then it followed that it should have a distinctive cultural history in the spirit of Boas's particularism (Sklar 1971).

Dorson's use of "civilization" to describe America suggested that the cultural history of America is one of progress and expansion. Its cultural features had intellectual and artistic value and could be compared internationally, especially to ancient societies that left cultural imprints as they expanded. "Civilization" had a wartime reference in its assumption that if Europe destroys itself as a formerly vital civilization, then America would be the last bastion of a Western or humanistic civilization (Gleason 1984, 352). In fact, "civilization" later gave way to "culture" as the preferred term for describing a holistic American studies project (Mechling, Merideth, and Wilson 1973; Spiller 1973; Wise 1979). The culture concept had built into it vagueness because it covered both ideas and the expression of those ideas. And those expressions in a work such as Henry Nash Smith's could vary from canonical literature to folk legends. Following the suggestion of Constance Rourke in 1942, some American studies scholars such as Walter Blair and Franklin Meine saw a nationalist mission to find in folklore the "roots" of American culture. Dorson began with her premise in Jonathan Draws the Long Bow, but after the conversion experience of fieldwork, and informed by New Class values, he revised and publicized the use of folklore in the culture concept of American nationalism.

The pivotal moment Dorson chose to announce his nationalist "Theory for American Folklore" was significant for an organizational reason. It strengthened in his mind the consensus of folklore, history, and literature in American studies and anthropology. It was the first time that the American Folklore Society met with the American Studies Association in addition to the American Anthropological
Association. He viewed an organizational mix, and older generation, interested variously in the literary and historical development of an American civilization, the pluralist basis of culture in geographically bound groups, the origin and diffusion of folktale motifs and types internationally, and the creative use of folklore. His opening paragraph used humor to pose a serious challenge of a new American generation for a nationalist direction formed out of the old mix. He wrote: "I can point to the success of such union already pragmatically demonstrated in the nuptials between the secretary-treasurer of the American Folklore Society, MacEdward Leach, and his charming spouse, a holder of the doctor's degree in American Civilization from the University of Pennsylvania. The argument of this paper will be that the child of such union is the properly reared American folklorist of the next generation" (Dorson 1971a, 15). Hoping to stage another great galvanizing debate, he arranged for elder leaders of the organizations to comment on his presentation.

He structured his presentation of his theory according to the organization of the midcentury American studies model. Out of troubled old approaches, new and improved ones emerge that would be appropriate to the needs of the unique American scene. Dorson identified seven existing views of folklore, each flawed for the study of folk traditions in the United States: comparativism (internationalist historic-geographic), cultural anthropology, folk song and folk music specialization, special pleading (myth-ritual, sexual symbolism, class struggle), regionalism, literary history, popularization. He softened his blow by claiming that each approach admirably served its own ends, but was faulty for not being comprehensive in its outlook on the special American case. His new type, he promised in an appeal to pluralist consensus, would show the "common ground" of the "science of folklore" and the "history of American civilization," and he hoped for a "cooperative inquiry into the behavior of folklore within the American environment" (Dorson 1971a, 47).

Dorson presented his case pragmatically rather than philosophically. His intent was to locate the distinctive purpose, and therefore scholarly respectability, of American folklore studies. He imagined a young student interested in folklore seeking "professional order." Once "acculturated," he opined, the student would become accustomed to thinking of analyzing literary or cultural types but would not be part of an intellectual type that could vie for disciplinary power. Echoing New Class rhetoric, Dorson yearned for "one standard vocabulary, the common frame of reference, and the accepted critical or empirical approach within which controversy arises" instead of "a kaleidoscope of activities" and "multiplicity of accents" that may marginalize the new entrants, who he described as "transients or refugees" from "a host." So he pragmatically outlined an approach that would turn the subject of folklore into an object, combine and transform previously held approaches into a comprehensive outlook.

With reference to folklore's role in the scholarly landscape, much of Dorson's paper concerned "problems and inquiries the American folklorist will be equipped
to undertake” (Dorson 1971a, 29). Dorson’s bias toward analyzing the connection of American traditions to the nation’s distinctive historical periods and movements was bound to disturb many of his internationalist colleagues. The conclusion followed from the method that folklore must be correlated with, and studied as an outgrowth of, major and dramatic historical events unique to the American nation. Within the sequence of great debates in which Dorson engaged, his polemic brought to the fore the revised nationalist role of folklore and importance of historical authenticity within the American discourse on culture into the Cold War years.

Essential to the idea of a new nationalism is the view that America’s uniqueness, and unity, comes from social variety brought together by democratic consensus. In countries such as England, Germany, and Japan, Dorson found “tidy” cultural histories of relative social homogeneity. Although Dorson recognized the echoes in his argument of European romantic nationalism, and similar historical arguments for national cultural uniqueness, he viewed a social landscape in America more complex than for England, Germany, and Japan where folklore became interpreted as ancient poetic stirrings of a national soul (W. Wilson 1982c, 1989; see also MacGregor-Villarreal 1989). Dorson insisted that national folklore emerged in the United States in a distinctive sequence to bring together diverse groups under the prevalent “type” in a certain historical period: religious for the colonial period, political or democratic in the era of the new republic, economic from the close of the Civil War to the 1960s, and finally the humane in the “modern” period. In countries such as Australia and Canada whose diverse social histories he called “analogous” to the United States, Dorson beheld “a far simpler situation” of ethnic transplantation or fusion between European and Indian inheritance. Dorson contended that the United States had folk types of the Yankee and immigrant, American black and Indian, whose elusive common ground needed explanation. Further separating America as a special case to Dorson was that it “looks back to no ancient racial stock, no medieval heritage, no lineage of traditions shrouded in a dim and remote past” (Dorson 1971a, 28).

What America did have, he claimed, were “great dramatic movements” that naturally influence the formation of folklore, even that which is socially diverse. The movements he saw as especially distinctive were exploration and colonization, revolution and the establishment of a democratic republic, the westward surge, the tides of immigration, the slavery debate that erupted in civil war, and the triumph of technology and industrialization. They further conjured special American themes such as regionalism, patriotism and democracy, and mass culture. With such a survey, it became obvious to Dorson that the explanatory power of historical context had been neglected in the folkloristic enterprise, and his theoretical contribution was to suggest that the distinctive historical framework of traditions and institutions had shaped an American character. Dorson thus argued that although America had changed dramatically, especially in the twentieth century, it
had some traditions, or ideas, that persisted through its history. Indeed, by this argument America could not be explained without reference to its folklore which revealed a coherent American history influencing authentic cultural experience. And without American folklore appearing emergent and indigenous, in contradistinction to a transplanted folklore in America, the claim for a separate culture or civilization could not be made (McDowell 1948b).

This nationalist argument was hardly a question before the 1930s, for folklore was often attached to peasant, ancient, or aboriginal societies, and outside of American Indians and African Americans, the United States as a field of study was ironically underrepresented in the anthropological pages of the *Journal of American Folklore*. Whether analyzed by Thompson’s international comparativism or Boas’s cultural particularism, folklore appeared variable over space, but stable over time, and therefore not prone to modern historical national movements. Alexander Haggerty Krappe, author of *The Science of Folklore* (1930), signaled a prevalent purist attitude when he wrote: “there exists no such thing as American folklore, but only European (or African, or Far Eastern) folklore on the American continent, for the excellent reason that there is no American ‘folk’” (Krappe 1930, 291). Thirty years later, a British reviewer of Dorson’s *American Folklore* (1959) could observe, “The United States is still surprisingly adolescent in some respects
but no nation surely has been more persistent in examining its folklore" (Peate 1960, 61). Several Americanists made a claim for a distinctive American folklore within the historical context of a rising American civilization after the 1930s. Constance Rourke was especially influential in her observation of a dominant "folk strain" in the formation of an American character played out in popular culture and Martha Warren Beckwith in her legitimation of America as a field for research of living traditions (Rourke [1931] 1959; Beckwith 1931b). Reacting to Krappe's comment, Ben Botkin used both Rourke's and Beckwith's ideas to buttress his argument for some "indigenous" American folklore that comes from its special history, landscape, and society (Botkin 1940; 1944, xxiv; 1949a). In reply to the view of an absent American folk, Botkin before Dorson had answered that there is "not one folk but many folk groups—as many as there are regional cultures or racial or occupational groups within a region" (Botkin 1929, 12; 1944, 44).

Dorson in his 1941 essay on American comic demigods had sought to make finer distinctions between authentic traditions belonging to these groups and popular reinterpretations used by Botkin and Rourke for expressing folklore, although he understood the need to broaden the definition of folklore beyond ancient myths and fairy tales. Dorson's essay inspired Wilson Clough in 1943 to ask, "Has American Folklore a Special Quality?" He agreed that to make the case alongside other nations, American folklore would need to show new examples that bear the stamp of "true" folklore—indigenous, of obscure origin, and of unknown authors. Authenticity, he agreed with Dorson, translated to intensity of subcultural experience. It is distinctive because of the historic "divorce from the European inheritance and its more static environment." Therefore, a distinctive, if adolescent, American history influences a native folklore that is "more democratic, the more human, the more valuable, for the absence of the naively supernatural" (Clough 1944, 119). In short, it contains as part of the national character, a more pronounced realism and pragmatism.

The closest precedent to Dorson's "theory" is University of Minnesota professor Philip Jordan's pronouncement in 1946 of a "New Folklore." He had in preparation a book on the National Road that made a case for an emergent folklore about a road, indeed a middle ground between south and north, that represented the growth of a national self-identity as Americans moved westward (Jordan 1948). Dorson credited Jordan with uncovering incipient forms of American backwoods humor that became traditional in the new nation (Dorson 1946a, 91; 1971a, 116; Jordan 1938). Jordan had done more than Dorson was willing to admit, however, to locate the authenticity of folklore within a historic process, and in fact Jordan had beaten Dorson to the punch with his criticism of popularized Bunyan tales. Four years before Dorson's famous "Folklore and Fake Lore" essay, Jordan had condemned narratives about Bunyan that had been "commercialized in vulgar fashion" and peddled to a "credulous public ... duped daily by market-place sharpsters" (Jordan 1946, 278–79). Jordan's main case was that if the definition of
folklore was to be other than ancient survivals or literary fabrications, it needed tests of authenticity, and it needed trained, professional folklorists (Jordan 1946, 279–80). "Folklore, in its broader definition, includes larger areas of human experience when it surveys traditional modes of political, economic, and social activity," Jordan wrote in his 1946 manifesto (275). Jordan's special historic "areas quite unique to folklore" brought in America's westward movement, immigration, industrialism, and urbanization. Jordan presaged Dorson's stated interest in contemporary "folkstuff" of the white-collar world and the "unofficial culture" of the city. He lamented that "little attempt has been made to comprehend the folk mind" and Dorson equally ended his presentation with the hope that American folklore will "illuminate the American mind" (Jordan 1946, 277; Dorson 1971a, 48). Although Dorson did not cite Jordan in his presentation of a "Theory for American Folklore," he drew support from his Harvard associates. He pointed to Henry Nash Smith's interpretation of the cultural specialness of the American frontier and Daniel Boorstin's view that because American civilization differed so widely from that of Europe, it needed to be studied through new categories (Dorson 1971a, 33, 48).

Although Dorson's Americanist approach cut against the grain of most folkloristic work during the 1950s, the discussion from the floor did not turn into the grand theoretical debate or galvanizing experience that Dorson wished for. Several speakers picked up the old fakelore issue, since Dorson saved his harshest words for the popularizers among the existing views of folklore. Others also returned a charge that Dorson had once shot at Botkin—the chauvinism of a nationalistic perspective. Melville Herskovits, the Boasian anthropologist, probably took greatest exception to Dorson's nationalistic view, challenging Dorson's definition of an American culture. He commented: "so far as any specific folkloristic quality, no matter how defined, is concerned, there is no single American culture. There are the enclaves, the pockets, the localities, where peoples of different origin or occupation have developed particular ways, whether because of internal circumstance or historical derivation" (Herskovits 1959, 217). Herskovits balked at the use of "American character" and pointed out the danger of obscuring subcultural persistence and difference outside of an imagined American consensus: "The use of a concept as vague and overinclusive as this, it seems to me, should everywhere be avoided, even where it is used in passing, as is the case here. Certainly in view of the varying ethnic derivations and, in particular, the different historical backgrounds of the segments in the total population of this country, it loses any precision. It thus tends to block, rather than to further the ends of analysis" (Herskovits 1959, 217). He feared that Dorson's approach could lead to political chauvinism and scholarly balkanization.

William Hugh Jansen especially raised the warning flag of Nazi Germany as a harsh lesson for nationalistic folklorists in America (Jansen 1959a, 236). The honored elder Stith Thompson meanwhile joined Jansen in worrying about the
methodological isolationism that could result from a lack of comparison with other countries and cultures. Daniel Hoffman admired Dorson’s search for a national tradition, but sighed that “our quest for the unity of a defining principle is once again baffled by the protean multiplicity of American folklore” (Hoffman 1959, 227). He also had great difficulty with Dorson’s facile linking of post- and preindustrial cultural processes. Hoffman complained that Dorson was not purist enough: “I cannot accept the assertion that ‘mass culture breeds its own special varieties of folklore.’ What is culturally viable as folklore in American life seems to me to pertain by definition to the pre-industrial and transitional phases of our history” (Hoffman 1959, 230). Louis Jones hit Dorson from the popularizer side by rejecting the recasting of folklore into a specialized study that would have a mission without reference to the interests of the public good.

Dorson’s rejoinder accepted the concerns of his discussants. He sounded the tone of consensus, but stuck to the assertion of America as a special case: “I certainly never meant to give the impression of wanting our students to become single-minded, and narrow-minded, American folklorists. But it seems to me that the person who is concerned with folk tradition within the United States needs to be aware that there are special problems of the historical background of our country, and I was considering simply those problems which are approached by students of American literature who have had no formal training in folklore at all” (Dorson 1959b, 238). To the worry of chauvinism, he assured his listeners that students needed to be familiar with the folklore of at least one other country, and that awareness should prevent exalting one national tradition over all others. As for scholarly isolationism, he came out pragmatically: “And if a person is studying American folklore, there is no reason why he cannot be a comparative folklorist, or musicologist, or anything else. He is simply one type of folklorist, not necessarily to the exclusion of other types” (Dorson 1959b, 238).

In hindsight, it appears to me that Dorson emphasized a clarion call for an American professionalism based on the presence of an American historical field more than a signal of new direction. Dorson in his review of the “theory” a decade later questioned the impact of the presentation since “American folklore studies continued along their merry separate ways, and the seven sinful schools kept on sinning with increased vigor” (Dorson 1971a, 51). He found detractors to duel, of course, but his strategy for nudging an historical approach to American tradition into folklore studies turned to claiming young students in the “folknik” generation of the 1960s. He counted the work of Alan Dundes on the futuristic orientation in American worldview, Roger Abrahams on urban black folklore, Jerome Mintz on Hasidic culture, and Charles Keil on black blues music as fitting into his conception of interpreting traditions—old and new—against the background of special historical conditions of the United States. If this choice of the “Theory” was not self-conscious on the part of the authors (although two of them had been Dorson’s students), then Dorson offered that “the ‘Theory’ will claim them as true American
folklorists who perceive the intimate bonds between the culture of the folk and the history of the American experience” (Dorson 1971a, 77). As Dorson had hoped, the young folklorists of the 1960s had more of a disciplinary self-identity drawn from university study, and Dorson was their dean. He made it a point to venture beyond Indiana University and teach during the 1970s at folklore study centers at the University of Pennsylvania and University of California at Berkeley, and keep up a grueling lecture schedule.

Through the new university-trained folklorists of the 1960s and 1970s, Dorson spread his watchwords into American culture of fakelore, fieldwork, and folk history. In 1972, he issued a basic textbook with his introduction devoted to concepts of folklore and folklife studies. He again surveyed existing “theoretical points of view,” beginning with the old Finnish historical-geographical method and ending with later approaches including his own, which he now called “the hemispheric theory.” He had separated the Old World from the New, and expanded his idea for national tradition from the United States to other countries in South and North America. He seemed more equivocal about the presence of a unique American tradition when he wrote, “Clearly one cannot speak about an Old World national tradition with its relative stability, rootedness, and long ancestry, in the same fashion as the New World blends. (Australia, also a colonized continent with separate aboriginal and settlers’ traditions, belongs with the Americas in this formulation)” (Dorson 1972b, 43–44). More so than before, Dorson recognized the subcultural forces of ethnicity and race, even if he took less stock of class conflict (relegating it to the misrepresentations of the “ideological” concept). Dorson summarized: “According to the hemispheric theory, the folklore of each New World country needs to be analyzed in terms of its ethnic-racial and historical ingredients. In one country the African element may be high, in another the Indian, in another the colonial German. The task for the New World folklorist is to examine closely the processes of syncretism, adaptation, acculturation, retention, accommodation, revitalization, recession, and disappearance that determine the ultimate product” (Dorson 1972b, 44).

Dorson ended his survey with the latest concept—“contextual”—that many new students of folklore were embracing. Calling them “young Turks,” he included some of the same names he had listed in his review of the “Theory”: Alan Dundes and Roger Abrahams. Later these figures would point out that a contextual “school,” per se, did not exist, but various interpretations of “performance,” “dynamics,” and “artistic communication” did. In structuring some of the work of the new generation into an umbrella concept, Dorson showed the continued growth of folklore studies as a discipline and the liberated spirit of its students. By placing it after his theory, he also implied that they took their cue from his call for new directions appropriate to the American scene. Reflecting on Dorson’s use of “young Turks,” Dan Ben-Amos wrote, “Anyone who reads into this epithet the resentment a senior figure in the field might feel toward a young, rebelling horde is
In a posed 1962 photograph taken in the Folklore Archives at Indiana University, Richard Dorson shows his Israeli student Dan Ben-Amos the cover of *Folktales of Israel* (edited by Dov Noy), a new addition to his Folktales of the World series for the University of Chicago Press. The cover of *Folktales of Japan* (edited by Keigo Seki) is on the table. Ten years later, Dorson identified Ben-Amos (then teaching at the University of Pennsylvania), in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, as one of the “young Turks” espousing “contextual” approaches to “folklore traditions” and heralding “a new departure in the writing of folklore books of the future.” (IU Photographic Services, Indiana University)

not sensitive to the personal affinity Dorson felt for the group. More likely, he anticipated with relish a spirited debate that could ensue from a contextualist manifesto” (Ben-Amos 1989, 52).

Dorson’s last debate echoed his first. In a published challenge in 1978, he urged a final fight between “folklore in America vs. American folklore” (Dorson 1978c). The distinction between the two had been voiced during the 1940s by Ben Botkin in response to Alexander Krappe’s assertion that there was no such thing as an indigenous American folklore (Botkin 1949a; see also Dorson 1983b, 328). And ironically, Dorson had been critical of Botkin for overplaying the nationalist card. The difference in Dorson’s rhetoric in 1978 was that he linked the “folklore in America” approach to the contextualism of the young Turks, as well as comparative, psychological, and structural approaches. He viewed these approaches together as getting away from the historical, communitarian view of his revised nationalism. He regarded “folklore in America as part of a universal model,” and as in other debates, he found it important “to distinguish between universal and
national models” (Dorson 1983c, 323). He tried to shatter the universal model by scoffing at its “fantasy of predicting human behavior” wherever it may be found in spontaneous social situations. Dorson’s position was not as extreme as his polemic implied, since he had in his scholarship claimed attention to context—historical and social—and had early on criticized Botkin for not considering the processes of storytelling performance (Dorson 1950a; see also Dorson 1972e). He wanted to direct the consideration of context, however, through history toward national themes and problems. What was mainly lacking in “folklore in America,” he most strongly declared, was the special relation of cultural expressions of Americans to the national democratic experience. The ultimate issue for Dorson revolved around the use of the past to explain an American tradition.

Together with a young faculty member at the Folklore Institute, I offered Dorson explanations for the apparent neglect of American historical experience in the work of contemporary folklorists (Bronner and Stern 1980). Dorson implied that considerations of folklore in America defied comparison and therefore meaningful analysis, but we pointed out the appeal of ethnographic perspectives recording the frames of the variable present in a contemporary era of communication. Carrying the empiricism of fieldwork further than Dorson’s text collecting, such perspectives allowed for observation of folklore as it is enacted. With such attention to individual behaviors, the influence of historical experience seemed distant, much as we were intellectually drawn to its holism. We challenged Dorson’s contention that folklore in America and American folklore represented opposing methods, the second an indefensible one. Dorson had presented his methodology as the only historical approach, but we knew of or conceived others less ethnocentric and rigid. We thought that Dorson’s approach led to a tautology, which was based on the assumption of a unique national history giving rise to a unique folklore whose existence testified to the validity of viewing American history in terms of dramatic, exceptional events. We saw explanatory possibilities in a behavioral and cultural history tied to social ethnography (Joyner 1975; Abrahams 1976; Bronner 1982, 1986b, M. Jones 1982).

Using Dorson’s own criticism of Botkin, was it possible that the inadequacy of Dorson’s sources compelled him “to use a topical or thematic arrangement, a far less satisfying method than a survey by folk groups, which would enable us to know just who possesses the lore” (Dorson 1948b, 77)? Dorson’s placement of folklore in America in opposition to American folklore, we contended, set up false dichotomies in scholarship, particularly since there was no consensus regarding a folklore-in-America approach. It was a “type” of his own making. Finally, we argued that Dorson’s explanation of folklorists not availing themselves of historical methodology—lack of familiarity with historiography—appeared wrong or at least presumptuous (see de Caro 1976). Indeed, the “performance-centered” editors of the notable volume Theorizing Folklore (1993) observed that history played a central role in the essays. One “axis of historical concern,” they noted, was a
diachronic analysis of cultural forms. Although as Elizabeth Fine noted, this his­
torical rediscovery “promises to reveal additional insights about the relationship of
performance to social life and other modes of communication,” it appeared less
about Dorson's goal of identifying national tradition than in locating precedents
for behavior (Fine 1996). The second axis for the editors of Theorizing Folklore that
would have bristled the objectivist Dorson was a critical, often political, scrutiny of
folklore as context, and folklore studies as an issue of cultural construction and
recontextualization (Briggs and Shuman 1993, 115–21). This move suggested to the
editors a departure from what they considered Eurocentric nationalism and the
arrival of a performance-centered model of the folk exploring “the diversity of
intra-group difference” as well as “artistic communication in small groups” (Briggs

Dorson’s assumption of an overriding national tradition created difficulties for
folklorists because it smacked of ethnocentrism or the folk cultural basis in the
local and subcultural. Simply knowing another country’s history, as Dorson once
suggested, was not enough to get around the problem, since it can merely com­
 pound nationalistic modeling, as it might have in Dorson’s selected comparisons
to Japan and England. Following several arguments in Theorizing Folklore, in fact,
one can read in folklore a counter-national force, since it dramatized instances of
individual control and could express human values that were subversive to a state
civilization. Dorson drew much of his case for a national tradition, maybe too
much of his case, from selected narrative examples. He thus appeared to overem­
phasize an overarching tradition extrapolated from supposedly complete, static
forms in “untampered” stories and customs. His arguments for representativeness
from isolated authentic examples seemed to us as much of a stretch as Botkin’s.
His acceptance of an encompassing national character blocked recognition of a
growing concern among young students of tradition for uncovering specific
behavior and cognition ascribed to individuals, one of whose identities might be
“American.” It was for these reasons that we felt historical methodology, namely
the one advocated by Dorson, had not been incorporated into folklore studies.

We were not arguing that certain dramatic events and movements were not par­
ticular to the American experience, nor that historical periodicity was not a signif­
 icant context. Rather, we were pointing out that many folklorists felt uneasy with
the extent to which Dorson identified overgeneralized American themes as tradit­
ions which can be expressed culturally. A problem arose in Dorson’s reference to
themes as “traits,” implying an ontological status comparable to the cultural reali­
 ty of folklore. To many folklorists they were arbitrary categories with little relation
to the cultural context of situated folklore performance. One example is his decla­
ration that the theme of boosterism—attributes of “salesmanship” and “prom­
tionalism”—was “an essential trait of the American character” because one can
find antecedents “in the frontier boast of the backwoodsman and glib talk of the
Yankee peddler” (Dorson 1978a, 181–82). But is it really unique, and can it be
directly linked in a causal chain to these historic examples? After all, the practice of promoting one's wares, it could be argued, is fundamental broadly to competitive market economies and not exclusive to the United States. Moreover, Dorson did not show the agency that might have led to certain kinds of expressions of boosterism in the United States. What about the guild systems of nineteenth-century England and Scandinavia that attempted to lure clientele by parading elaborate insignias? What is to be made of European towns raising their prestige at the same time by organizing local festivals to draw in trade, of London street criers who huckstered their products and were portrayed in engravings as early as the eighteenth century? Although Americans arguably may have elevated advertising to fine art, such boosterism at best was a matter of degree, not of uniqueness. And we questioned the causal relation without some presumptive agency that Dorson implied between a categorical "theme" and cultural behavior.

Although Dorson recognized dangers in overstressing the Americanness of American conditions, he nevertheless appeared guilty of pushing the "uniqueness argument" to an extreme in his later years (Dorson 1982b, 1983b). In various essays after 1975, he pushed for recognition of the exceptionalism of American folklore, of American folklore studies, of American history, and periods within American history, and of a historical theory for American folklore. In the *Handbook of American Folklore* (1983), he positioned his essay on "A Historical Theory for American Folklore" first, followed by a supportive chapter by Lawrence Levine on "How to Interpret American Folklore Historically." He allowed two others to trail, one by Roger Abrahams lumping together ethnographic and sociological approaches, and the other by Archie Green on the positive uses of American liberal thought (of popular sovereignty and democratic equity, of enlightenment rights and communal needs). In discussing the debate between D. K. Wilgus and Stanley Edgar Hyman over the latter's claim that Child ballads in America deteriorated from supernatural to realistic elements, Dorson consented to Wilgus's criticism that this process of "modernization" occurred in England as well (Dorson 1978c, 105–6). Still, Dorson felt obliged to insist that modernization has been keenly developed by American enterprise. The recognition of intensification was hardly sufficient to brand the resulting folklore as "American" while its European counterpart was stamped "un-American."

Another example of forced assignment of the American theme by Dorson occurred in his claim for the historical interpretation of his students' work. In his editorial comments on Janet Langlois's "Belle Gunness, the Lady Bluebeard: Community Legend as Metaphor" (1978), Dorson saw as her point the manifestation of boosterism through the widespread popularity of a local legend. A close reading of her essay, however, reveals no references to any such booster spirit. In addition, Langlois failed to follow Dorson's own criterion for designating research "American folklore" which was that "the writer present the relation of folklore to American cultural, social, political, and economic history in chronological frame."
Indeed, the main point of her article was that historical time is of little consequence in explaining these narratives, for underlying them are symbolic references to a static system of social relationships. In her analysis of the “story of the cows” in which Belle Gunness insisted that her neighbor release Belle’s property, Langlois stated, “Whose cows initiated the action, which was antecedent and which was consequent act is not as important as the relationship between the neighbors.” In sum, we worried that rather than explain events, Dorson was using history to show national identity beyond the awareness of participants in the culture.

Dorson was eager to debate, for he felt we had espoused, rather than explained, undesirable trends in folklore studies. In fact, we had both been immersed in American studies and more than most appreciated the benefits of history. Capping his rebuttal, he insisted that our “failure to appreciate that attitudes, beliefs, practices, possess their own histories … is symptomatic of a general malaise among folklorists in America, who lock themselves into a parochial present and blind themselves to the buried treasure of America’s past” (Dorson 1980c, 89). He was not any less friendly to me after the debate appeared in print. In fact, he was happy to “stir up the troops,” he told me, and he supported his plaint of folklorists’ presentism by mentioning that he found it indicative that the festschrift prepared in his honor by students and colleagues was entitled *Folklore Today* (1976). He appreciated the professional honor, to be sure, but mentioned that “there wasn’t much history or American civilization in there.” In the debate with us, he hoped to again survey the terrain, show what was missing, and direct the discipline.

Shortly after publishing his rejoinder, Dorson edited a special issue of the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* concerning the historical theme in American folklore (Dorson 1980a). Significantly, his editorial remarks seemed to retreat from some bold assertions made earlier. Although he iterated his concern for the prevalence among folklorists of folklore in America over American folklore, Dorson actually shifted ground when proclaiming: “The training and energies of folklorists in the United States are insufficiently directed toward the traditions arising out of the American historical experience. We must also utter the caution that folklore studies are comparative, cross-cultural, and international, but the matter here is one of balance, and paradoxically American folklorists are neglecting their own turf” (Dorson 1980a, 91). He indicated that his historical view was another relative “type” rather than the synthesis he had hoped for. By drawing attention to American folklorists’ “own turf,” rather than their specific approaches, Dorson moved the focus of the American theme from method to scope. The American folklore perspective was reduced from a claim of theory to a listing of Dorson’s favorite topics. His themes of colonization, westward expansion, and so forth lost their determinative force and became historical headings. Indeed, William Clements’s psychological study of Pentecostal narrators and Gary Alan Fine’s sociological analysis of legends about fast food in modern society included in the historical theme issue ran directly counter to Dorson’s own thematic methodology (Clements 1980; Fine 1980b).
From one position Dorson never budged. He believed America's history was being neglected by American folklorists and its folklore was overlooked by historians. What he perhaps did not fully realize is what new students of American folklore sought for folk cultural data in America's past. Dorson had been drawn to texts from which he could extrapolate national or regional character or the temper of the times, while many students applied an interest in explaining enacted behavior in social situations to find actor and action statements within historically described events (Isaac 1982; Bauman 1983b; Abrahams and Szwed 1983; Abrahams 1992b; Bronner 1982, 1986b). Although Dorson had proposed that when the folklorist does historical research he or she “should rest content with establishing the vigor and continuity of traditional behavior,” many folklorists were not willing to rest there. They looked for interpretation that could go beyond to finding “reflection” of a historical period, region, or country, and get at the workings of mind (Glassie 1975; Dundes 1980a). It had become evident that Dorson’s use of “behavior” was misleading. He still adhered to a notion of static outputs of behavior—his “typed” narrative—rather than detailing the actions and thoughts, the motivations and aspirations, the actual conduct and communication of the human actors and settings involved in behavior that were being studied by young students of what he called folklore in America. Ironically, the so-called “contextualists” called him guilty of a charge he leveled at Botkin: lacking in “portraits of the master storytellers, the drama of collecting, and the folk setting” (Dorson 1948b).

Although Dorson had been very much involved in studies of the behavior of folklore performance and individual performers, and although he appreciated more than most folklorists the international and subcultural dimensions of folklore creation and diffusion, young folklorists associated him increasingly with the nationalist line that they considered methodologically restrictive and ethnocentrically conservative. Dissatisfaction stemming from acceptance of unsubstantiated causal explanations for American behavioral phenomena led American folklorists during the 1970s to seek alternative perspectives. Whether influenced by anthropology, sociology, or psychology, many of these folklorists strove to explain occurrences by detailed investigations of all situational factors that produced events and affected individuals. The locus of observation, or ethnography, had become even smaller than Dorson’s “collecting” in a county or region. In the synchronic and ethnographic approach that Dorson on occasion found too behavioral and overly localized, and therefore too marginalized, researchers examined the ways that “American” is used by individuals in their everyday activities. Dorson looked at “American” as a historical rather than cognitive category. Dorson typically sought thematic generalization and national unity from his data. More of his students examined cultural specificity and cultural conflict from theirs.

The distance between students and Dorson was especially evident in the growing tide of ethnic studies. Dorson felt he was a banner bearer for this interest, since he early took on the melting pot popularizers of “100 percent Americanism” with
admonitions about the persistence of ethnic traditions in the American experience. While he held up his collections of black folklore as objective analyses, they unmistakably appealed for an ongoing process of cultural democracy in America. Showing the integration of European influences on black folklore confirmed an integrative process in America that was likely to continue. This is how he explained the persistence of ethnic folklore within a national tradition. Ethnicity and race were not melted away, but rather integrated into a national experience. Dorson's view was influential on the likes of Nathan Glazer, who reflected that "those of us who were students of ethnicity and race in the 1960s and held the perspective that assimilation—or, if one prefers the milder term, integration—was what happened to ethnic and racial groups in America, could look unconcernedly on many of the signs of continuing black separation and difference" (Glazer 1997, 149–50). Among those signs were the explosion of urban race riots as the 1960s ended, conflicts over community control of schools, and growing black nationalism. Against this background, more students of the 1970s suggested that collection of folklore offered a view of intentionally alienated groups prevented from cultural citizenship by racism, poverty, and victimization. Dorson recoiled at the suggestion that a cultural democratic process could fail America.

Before a view of an emerging racial separatism in American life had been widely dubbed "multiculturalism," Dorson had to confront its issues, especially as his students formed interpretations that varied from his in the team project to collect folklore in the largely black, troubled city of Gary, Indiana, in the late 1970s (Carpenter 1978). To be sure, Dorson rethought his previous progressive assertions in light of his experience in Gary. Calling it alternately "the armpit of the nation" and "land of the millrats," he did not see the decay of Gary nearly as "America in minuscule," as he had the rurally benign Upper Peninsula of Michigan (Dorson 1981). But he still held to his integrationist view of, or hope for, America. One way that Dorson dealt with the growing challenge was to invoke scholarly authority to avoid politics by faulting the concern for growing separatism as a misguided result of method, especially ethnography.

Increasingly citing ethnography rather than history, many of Dorson's students tended to construct "American" as a context rather than an identity. It appeared increasingly in their dissertations as a complex of personal, familial, regional, ethnic, religious, economic, and political factors, among others, to which individuals refer differently depending upon their particular circumstances. In this construction, the force, the continuity, of tradition appeared less essential to folklore's mission. Students contemplated that in the ethnography of contemporary cultural events, functions of activities, and their integration into small groups, that respond to immediate conditions are more evident. Dorson recognized some of this trend in his embrace of "personal narratives" expressed by individuals, including some of his own making, but he treated the subject anecdotally and underestimated the analysis that was being brought to the multivalence of individual
performance (Dorson 1977f; see also Stahl 1989; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989a; Georges 1989a; Braid 1996). Those young scholars who focused on personal narratives that defied historical analyses of form, indeed of tradition as inheritance from the past, discussed the sense by which persons considered themselves to be manifesting particularly American and ethnic behavior without the causation of supposedly “well-known” historical themes and events (Georges 1984; Stern and Cicala 1991; Mechling 1993; Oring 1994; Dolby 1996). A different kind of process came into view with personal narratives. The personal narratives raised issues of the ways that individuals create traditions for themselves, and often, the ways that the new expressions reflected frustrations of marginalization.

Ethnographic attention to identity and process, often coupled with universalist concern for explaining human behavior, affected the perception by many baby-boom folklorists of Dorson’s concept of fakelore in addition to his claim for the uniqueness of American cultural experience. While still distinguishing between authentic and created experience, folklorists of the 1980s and 1990s referred increasingly to examples of festivals, tourist presentations, and literary retellings as “folklorism” (Voigt 1980; Bendix 1989; Sweterlitsch 1996). There was not the assumption of commercial exploitation, but rather, exploration of needs for community-building and identity formation. As a form of cultural production, folklorism was considered an extension of a process of tradition that needed to be analyzed for its structure, development, and function. It could be described ethnographically, therefore, as much as folklore (Bauman, Sawin, and Carpenter 1992). Many analyses blasted the strict dichotomy between the private world of folklore and the public realm of mass culture that Dorson had promoted to boost professionalism in the private intellectual sector of academe (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988; Abrahams 1992a; Mechling 1993; Hanson 1993; Dégh 1994; Bluestein 1994). Folklorists had found a way to intellectualize, rather than alienate, the public realm.

The American civilization model had been revised to take into account ethnography of the multiple situational frames of everyday experience. Focused less on cultural consensus and more on separation, new perspectives looked to incorporate fresh “isms” that Dorson avoided: feminism, multiculturalism, racism, sexism, classism. The implication of this shift was that it spotlighted groups other than the American trinity of region, occupation, and ethnicity. Both reducing the scale of social units and expanding the scope of traditional associations, the ethnographies covered identities and associations that were frequently analyzed as transnational or even counternational. In some cases, ethnographic studies focused tightly on behavioral “dyads”—the bond, and tradition, formed between two persons, and in one study even between a person and animal (Oring 1984b; Bendix 1987; Mechling 1989d). They often considered identities of gender, age, class, sexuality, family, indeed of individuality. Thus the national construction of American identity in contrast to Europe, or fascism, or communism, appeared less real, especially as the
Cold War ended. Ethnography returned identity to individual circumstances and reconnected Americans to universal concerns of gender and race, for example.

Preferring to see "expression" and "narrative" in specific cultural performances, ethnography also challenged the reality of a folk literature. Questioning fixed literary genres of traditional tales and legends, it blurred genres with contextual attention to ways that tradition emerges through the "dynamics," "strategies," and "interactions" of everyday conversation, behavioral gesture, and body image. Writing on "American Folklore and American Studies" during America's bicentennial, Richard Bauman and Roger Abrahams commented that studies emphasizing the "minuscule" rather than the whole—biography, repertoire, and performance style of folk performers and their sociocultural context—"have enriched the study of American folklore." "This approach," they concluded, "will note not only the specifics of performance, but the cultural equipment and expectations as well, and thus encompass both the unity and diversity of American expressive culture as enacted in social life" (Bauman and Abrahams 1976, 377).

Dorson fervently held to the idea of a liberal, enlightening spirit of folklore to reveal the relation of cultural groups to one another from the pluralist margins to the national center. Dorson's view of himself as an "other" in the study of "others" is significant to his work (and the work of many folklorists inspired by him) interpreting culture for the public. He had, in fact, planned, but never completed, a pluralist volume on the "Other America in Legend" to complement his more nationalistic America in Legend (1973). Returning to the distinction between folklore as objective reality and public image, he hoped to separate popular stereotypes from ethnic, racial, regional, industrial, and urban inheritance, and "consciousness" of grouped otherness (Dorson 1982b, 86–97). His thinking had been shaped, no doubt, by his late-in-life battles with the New Left and Old Right, his students' increasingly vocal concern for ethnicity and multiculturalism, and his ethnographic team "foray" into the "multietnic" city (Dorson 1981).

Discipline from Discourse

It can be argued that in significantly setting a tone of cultural discourse during the post-World War II years, Dorson revealed much of his own experience in his concern for a move of marginalized others to the center. Going in his life history from the ethnic city to the pastoral imagery of New England, he was aware of his relatively new arrival in American society. He struggled for his identity as an authoritarian "professional" in the university, and he referred to the fragility of his identity in folklore and American civilization studies from roots in "established" history and literature. In his many reminiscences, he boasted of his Algeresque pluck, intimating that his experience of scrapping from a subcultural background to a national center was the real American one. Dorson made much of his early emergence from the city and academy to find America in the rural, isolated landscape of
the multiethnic Upper Peninsula, and when he returned to write he made his argument that this was the real America in minuscule. His last fieldwork returned him to the familiar ground of the city, which he had marginalized as strange because of its density of industry and self-identity of difference.

Going north to urban, multiethnic Indiana, he made his case that “all three great folk traditions in the United States—the regional, the ethnic, and the occupational—can be observed and recorded in cities” (Dorson 1981, 232). In his rhetoric, Northwest Indiana and the Upper Peninsula were both “realities” that had been obscured or denied by commercial and scholarly fantasies. Even the recordable historic forms he presented as the real stuff of folklore expressed his concern with marginality and change. He began with the reality of American historic legends which he had claimed had been overlooked in the rush for international literary folktales. It is significant that he was especially drawn to hero cycles and their implication of beginning with lowly status and rising to popular support. Through his career, he pointed to immigrant dialect tales, a genre he claimed to discover. They represented to him the move of a second generation from ethnic marginality to centrality while recognizing its subcultural cultural roots. Indeed, the narratives were collected from sources most like himself—students and scholarly colleagues of the New Class. With the “personal narrative” that he analyzed from his own experience as well as those of his students, he found his ultimate issue—the entry of tradition toward the center of individuality in modern existence.

Leaving behind folklore vs. fakelore and folklore in America vs. American folklore, the discipline that Dorson ushered in confronted a fresh scholarly posturing and reconciliation: between central artistic text and social context at the periphery (Dorson 1972b, 45–47; Dorson 1982b, 71–72; Jones 1979; Ben-Amos 1979; Georges 1980; Ben-Amos 1993). In Dorson’s mind, the new controversy was really about integrating the social sciences and humanities in folklore, and in that tension confronted anew the relation of scholarship to the public. He related well to the fray because he had made reference to such an integration with his “theory.” Priding himself on his “open-mindedness” as long as professional standards were maintained, Dorson appeared to welcome the sophistication of the younger “contextualist” generation and looked for a “Hegelian synthesis” of text and context (Dorson 1982b, 72). He predicted: “The emergence of this sophisticated circle of youthful academic folklorists heralds a new departure in the writing of folklore books of the future. Texts and annotations will be subordinated to close analyses of group dynamics and psycho-cultural relationships. Fieldwork will become a more elaborate enterprise than the securing of verbatim texts” (Dorson 1972b, 47). His worry was that the “close analyses” suggested by the contextualists disengaged the public from the scholarly discourse of culture. He lambasted students and colleagues for using theoretical jargon that was inaccessible to the public. He wanted to educate the public with scholarship, rather than remove them from the discussion.
In light of the emergence of the challenge from within his discipline, Dorson revived his “theory” to create another consensus: the ways that history configured with “group dynamics” recognized peoplehood, and further, how folklore represented shared values and an ongoing cultural process he considered, or publicized, as American. Through all his debates, Dorson insisted on the American common ground that folklorists should have “the ideals of truth itself, fair play, equality, democracy, freedom, and the work ethic” (Dorson 1983c, 325).

Dorson had indeed followed and applied what he perceived as American tradition. With the integrity of professionalism, he hoped to have its ideals reinstilled in the American public, in contemporary mass culture, which he thought of as troubled and in need of reform. He believed Americans “needed” the folk, and fought for its honor. Upon reflection, he also required the folk and its American connection to satisfy his own sense of self and those sharing New Class values (Dorson 1974b, 1978e). In the discourse he spread through students’ work and popular publications, folk stood for authenticity and honesty in a corruptible, shallow modern culture. He called on the folk’s protectors to be incorruptible fighters and honest professionals. The folk, and America, he finally informed professional and layman alike, represents “a common humanity, out there somewhere” (Dorson 1978e, 269).