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Introduction

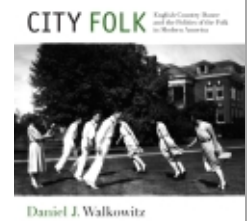
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Introduction

Virtually every schoolgirl educated in the United States in the twentieth century grew up doing folk dancing, though few probably thought of it as a substantive part of their educational experience. My wife, Judith, for instance, who grew up in suburban Long Island in the 1950s, remembers folk dance as one of the preferred gym options for girls; you did not have to change or take a shower in the middle of the day. In the class, she learned a variety of dances from many lands. Children's favorites such as the "Mexican Hat Dance" and, probably because of the Jewish background of the community, familiar Israeli folk dances such as "Mayim, Mayim" or "Do Di Li" alternated with some "American" folk dance favorites such as "Pop Goes the Weasel."

Judith was the subject of a practice of teaching folk dance to girls that had roots early in the century. As early as 1897, Mary W. Hinman taught a combination of ballroom and folk dance to both sexes at Chicago's Hull House, and ten years later, the principal at PS 15 in Manhattan crowed that some sixty "healthy, happy" fifth-grade girls in the Burchenal Athletic Club regularly performed fifteen northern European dances, from the Irish jig to the Hungarian csardas, Swedish frykdalspolska, Russian comarinskaia, and a minuet. By 1909, Elizabeth Burchenal, who directed the teachers who ran the club and was just becoming chair of the Folk-Dance Committee of the Playground Association of America, claimed to have trained over 250 (female) public-school folk dance teachers. These teachers, in turn, taught the dances to more than twenty-four thousand public-school girls.¹

Schoolboys sometimes participated in the dancing, but educators thought it to be an especially appropriate regime for girls, and it often became a regular part of their physical-education program. So, although I recall folk dancing as a schoolboy in the 1950s in northern New Jersey public schools, my memories are of being taught dances such as "The Virginia Reel" to accompany specific holiday programs. "The Virginia Reel" was taught as part of Thanksgiving festivities as an American traditional dance inherited from our

colonial ancestors. Our teachers did not know that the dance was actually a modified version of the classic English country dance “Sir Roger de Cloverly.” To our teachers—and to us—it was an authentic “American” product.²

As these personal anecdotes suggest, both the roots of English Country Dance and its development into a foundational folk dance movement in the United States have been obscured. Organized in March 1915 under the guidance of the English folklorist Cecil Sharp, the American Branch of the English Folk Dance Society is the oldest folk dance organization in the United States. Nearly a century later, it continues to thrive. At the outset of the twenty-first century, its descendant, the Country Dance and Song Society of America (CDSS), boasts over 250 affiliate groups and several thousand members. In addition, there are hundreds of other unaffiliated groups. Significantly, though, CDSS as an umbrella organization reflects the twinned notion of dances such as “The Virginia Reel”/“Sir Roger de Cloverly” as American and English; the organization includes ECD and kindred folk dance forms, square and contra (or American Country Dance), as part of an Anglo-American folk dance tradition and national cultural identity.

On any night of the week, one can country dance in virtually any metropolitan area of the country. The majority of the CDSS clubs are dedicated to contra dance, but several thousand English Country dancers gather weekly in locations as disparate as Fairbanks and Atlanta. In each genre, dancers take a partner and typically line up across from one another in longways sets that can be as long as the room permits, although English is more likely also to use shorter sets of two, three, or four couples. The usual pattern is for two couples to dance with each other in the line for thirty-two bars of music, and then each couple progress up or down the set, repeating the pattern with another couple. English and American music is quite different, however, and each evokes different body movements. Both genres use traditional tunes, but much English music is drawn from classical and baroque composers such as Henry Purcell and George Frederick Handel and from modern composers such as Baltimore’s Jonathan Jensen, who works in that vein. The English classical music tends to be more lyrical and the dancers “stately,” evoking what the folk revivalist Cecil Sharp called “gay simplicity.” In contrast, contra music is more energetic, mostly relying on Irish and Scottish jigs and reels and, more recently, old-time southern mountain music, and the dancers move more with gay abandon.

For most of the twentieth century, then, American children grew up learning to folk dance, and English Country Dance as a dance tradition advanced an Anglo-American national identity as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.

City Folk traces the history of the changing racial, ethnic, and class profile of the people who joined in that project and examines the cultural politics that attracted them to it.

Folk Modernism

The title *City Folk* points to two conjunctions of the urban and popular: the folk as an imagined subject from the rural past that contemporary and largely urban-suburban dancers revive; and the folk as the urban culture of the revival dancers themselves. This double reference intends to trouble longstanding anxieties among dancers and folklorists about both authenticity and the identity of the folk, because although the origins of folklore and anthropology informed the politics of the folk for early revivalists, the disciplines have not agreed on who constitutes the folk. For instance, folklorist Theresa Buckland has pointed out that Sharp, who dominated the early history of English Country Dance on both sides of the Atlantic and cast a long shadow over how the tradition was understood, simply adopted the “survival theory” of the folk developed in James Frazer’s influential *The Golden Bough* (1890) that was to shape folklore studies well into the twentieth century.³ Frazer’s views, like many of Sharp’s, have since been discredited by a new generation of folklorists, and today folklore remains divided: traditionalists privilege an “essential” rural folk presumed to express in their essence the native spirit of a pristine society, while modern folklorists assert a more plastic, evolving notion rooted in constantly changing or “invented” traditions that are not class or region specific.⁴ The traditional view remained prevalent through much of the twentieth century, however, and by celebrating the folk as the bedrock of pure, natural, “primitive” roots unsullied by the “modern,” urban, industrial world, made it easy to see the folk dance movement and its proponents as quintessentially antimodern.

The characterization of the folk as antimodern, however, though not wrong, misses the mark. Not only does it ignore these people’s cosmopolitan outlook and commitment to “progress,” but it replicates the historical tendency to see modernism and antimodernism as binaries, rather than as intermeshing tendencies. In English Country Dance, the antimodern “primitive” folk were an instrument to create a modern Anglo-American citizen. The premodern would be the tool of the modernizers.⁵ Thus, writing about Progressive reformers, the historian Andrew Camberlin Reiser notes that the term *antimodern* is used by dominant groups who benefit (sometimes indirectly) from the power of corporate capital. These reformers, like those who

led the folk dance revival and whose wives, daughters, and sons flocked to the new American dance venues, were generally part of the rise of the new business and managerial elite located in C. Wright Mills's new white-collar middle class. These were people, as the historian Marina Moskowitz has perceptively observed, invested in growth—and in stability. That is, they were structural reformers, not social levelers; they encouraged upward mobility but retained an abiding faith in the status quo. Thus, with vast numbers of dissenting immigrants pouring into urban “rookeries” at the turn of the century, early-twentieth-century elites searching for “natural” or premodern sources of “authentic” experience turned to folk dance to win the allegiance of subordinate groups to a common set of “American” values and attitudes in the culture. Some of them, such as, most notably, Henry Ford, turned to square dance, as an Americanizing project. Others “recovered” English Country Dance as the fount of Anglo-American culture.⁶

The historian Allan Howkins argues that those who revived the dance in England were not folklorists but new suburbanites who were moved “to live, or rather, invent English country life.”⁷ Howkins is of course correct about the revivalists’ “invention.” But as the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have observed in their important 1983 book, *The Invention of Tradition*, all traditions are invented, and “authenticity” is amorphous at best. In presuming traditions have a stable, essential meaning in some golden past, Howkins merely invokes an element of the older essentialist paradigm of the folk.

Challenging the hegemony of the dominant paradigm, *City Folk* takes the alternative modern view, seeing the folk as rooted in a local culture with its own political resonance. The folk need not be ancient or only of a peasantry, and the cultural life of an urban bourgeoisie is no less “genuine.” A folk tradition is no less “real” for being constantly revised or “invented” in ways that are fundamental to its essence. So although even Sharp came to view country dance as having lost its peasant origins by the late seventeenth century as it moved “upstairs” to parlors and drawing rooms for balls and performance by the gentry and nobility, one could argue instead that the dance represented then the culture of the gentry “folk.”⁸ Thus, the “folk process” is one in which local community cultures give each tradition its own inflection, and its history (changing over time) and individuals give it further individualized, historical expression.⁹

So all cultural forms in this study are expressions of a folk, and as a folk dance genre, English Country Dance expresses what its devotees and collectors imagined to be “Englishness” abroad and what they imagined as the

Anglo-American roots of “American” culture in the United States. But the debate over English Country Dance as a folk dance is less interesting to me as a test of authenticity than for how it illuminates who patrols the boundaries of “authenticity” and how they do it.¹⁰

English Country Dance, as the title *City Folk* means to suggest, is folk dance of the urban bourgeoisie but, more so, of a liberal class fraction that has carved out a place for itself in the helter-skelter, heterogeneous modern city. Liberalism, what the historian Daniel Rodgers has described as the transnational Anglo-American reform project to make the “reality” of the city rational and thinkable, was arguably the dominant ideology of the twentieth century. Settlements, folk culture, arts and crafts, and, in turn, English Country Dance embodied—figuratively and literally—solutions to the liberal problematic of the twentieth century. And although historians have charted liberalism’s rise and fall as a political and economic system and more recently have noted how it was implicated in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990, they have less appreciated how liberalism has been invested in cultural institutions. *City Folk* uses the folk dance movement as a prism through which to examine what I call the culture of liberalism.

The Politics of the Folk and Modern Liberalism

People in the modern era who chose to do English Country Dance—in contrast, for example, to those schoolchildren who were assigned it—have been a social and political breed apart. Folk dancers located themselves outside the mainstream of popular culture, but they did so in explicit relationship to aspects of that culture they found problematic. At the same time as some sought what several contemporaries called a “safe haven” or “refuge” from mainstream culture, they and others engaged in missionary activity to change it or offer what they believed to be a salutary alternative. The English Country Dance movement in both England and the United States fits that paradigm: the founding generation worried about the injurious moral and physical dangers that the “tango craze” and unchaperoned dance halls would have on everything from women’s reproductive organs to working-class immigrants’ respectability.

The distinctive class position and politics of these country dance communities also marked them as a world apart from the new immigrant denizens of the urban metropolises. In class terms, these communities constituted a particular fraction of affluent professional-technical workers, and their politics reflected the changing tides of liberalism in the twentieth-century United

States and England. Fabian socialists and progressive social reformers played major roles in the development of the English folk dance movement on both sides of the Atlantic early in the century, and interviews and surveys document the central place of left-liberals reared in the midcentury second folk revival in the more recent history.

Liberalism advanced in English Country Dance alongside a tide of nationalism, and both were expressed in the folk revival that swept across western Europe and the United States at the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Native-born elites in urban industrial centers feared immigrant “others” they saw “flooding” into cities. “Superior,” “civilized” societies, they believed, had a mission to “uplift” the poor or, failing that, to remake them, and the folk revival became an instrument of a project that was nationalist, imperialist, and, at home, a form of domestic colonialism.¹¹ In England, for instance, the folk revival in dance centered on the English folk tradition as a native source of Englishness, in which dancers would embody the “peasant” folk as the bedrock of pure, natural, “primitive” roots unsullied by the “modern,” urban, and industrial. As I suggested earlier, Cecil Sharp believed the dances he recovered harked back to the farmhouses, village greens, and dancing booths of the annual fairs of medieval times and even to the “primitive” maypole dances. The “gay simplicity” of country dances and ballads, Sharp believed, contrasted with what the immigrant poor experienced in the bawdy, boisterous music halls. So, not surprisingly, it was Sharp who led the fight to have the folk repertoire made a permanent part of the school curriculum as an expression of the redemptive power of essential Englishness. This redemptive project was the work of liberalism: in doing and teaching English Country Dance, participants perform liberalism with the governance of space as a moral project, by creating, moving, and administering space to make it knowable, stable, and dependable. Folk dance associations were a cultural crucible in which liberals elaborated disciplinary regimes.¹²

The story of English Country Dance in the United States replicates these cultural politics. Sharp, who founded the American Branch of the English Folk Dance Society, advanced the dances as nominally about Englishness; but he and his Anglo-American followers appreciated that the dance tradition was equally about Americanism. As arbiters of American culture, East Coast WASP Brahmins, whose ancestors came from the British Isles, celebrated English Country Dance as part of an Anglo-American dance tradition and as the root of “American” contra and square dance. Progressive Era social reformers committed to Americanization saw these English dances as “respectable” and healthy alternatives to the sultry tango and wild, ver-

tigious spinning of the waltz and polka popular among immigrants. These reformers were equally anxious to make the structured environment of settlements, schools, and playgrounds an alternative to the dance halls, regarded by them as unchaperoned dens of inequity. Revivalists, then, on both sides of the Atlantic, paternalistically patrolled popular culture as part of political project to assimilate the immigrant working class. And though the elite English Country Dance community was itself a small community, the group had considerable social and political capital. In their articulation of English folk dance as an alternative to the rhythms, sounds, and expressions of sociability in the popular culture, dancers expressed “respectable” cultural signifiers, a socially resonant style of being American, of what we might call cultural citizenship.

Almost a century later, English Country Dance continued to define itself in no small part in relation to urban popular culture. The racial composition in particular of American and to a lesser extent English cities, had changed in the interim, of course, gaining new Black and Hispanic majorities. But the composition of the dance community changed as well, as “white ethnics” assimilated. As liberal elites, English Country dancers tried to live in and make sense of increasingly multiracial urban twentieth-century America. Some dancers expressed the desire to seek an alternative to the “speed-and-greed” culture or to the intense pulsating rhythms of “aerobic” music, each suggesting how fast-paced, hip-hop urban culture might have become modern metonyms for anxieties that devotees a century earlier had attributed to the music hall or the tango craze. A “modern” English Country Dance movement that emerged at the end of the twentieth century and in the new millennium reflected on the politics of liberalism and its relation to the problem of racism as it marked country dancing in the postwar city. In oral histories, many dancers spoke of finding a “refuge” in the enduring ties of an ideal (and idealized) dance community. But the history of English Country Dance in the United States highlights the contradictions within liberalism that made “community” as much about exclusion as inclusion. The English Country Dance community, in creating and celebrating itself and its dance floor as “safe spaces,” had to come up against the countervailing impulses of modern liberal culture that welcomed some people and kept others at a distance.

City Folk focuses on the revival history of English Country Dance in the United States. The American story, however, is a transnational one. Major figures and ideas move back and forth across the Atlantic, and most especially in this account, between England and the United States. More particu-

larly, as the urban imaginary informed the dance movements, leaders and ideas flowed between London and New York. The book follows that movement and ultimately tries to explain the irony that in the early twenty-first century, according to accounts by dancers from both sides of the Atlantic, English Country Dance flourishes more in the United States than it does in England.

This history begins in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and its American colony. The conventional origin story of the revival celebrates Cecil Sharp's encounter with Headington Morrismen in Oxfordshire on Boxing Day 1899. Sharp subsequently arrived in 1914 to "revive" America, but of course, as a British colony, colonial Americans knew that English Country Dance and the tradition persisted continuously in kindred forms in the southern mountains and New England countryside into the revival era. Chapter 1 of this book recounts these origin stories.

Part I then continues with paired chapters that trace Americans in England during the revival and then the English who, in turn, went to the United States to spread the English Country gospel. Class concerns animated these affluent dance reformers who worried about what they imagined as the dissolute culture of the poor. But there was a gendered hue to these worries as well, which equally marked the history of the dance community in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Thus, as the male "expert," Cecil Sharp came to dominate how the dances were taught and embodied. His lessons were advanced both by wealthy American women reformers who traveled to England to be certified by him and by women devoted to him who followed him to the United States to run the American movement. During an era of suffrage militancy for which Sharp had no tolerance, English Country Dance offered women leadership positions and public roles, but from a particular class position and in deference to a male idol. At the same time, Sharp vanquished other leaders with alternative embodiments of the dance, especially if they were strong women. Thus, Sharp and his followers advanced a white, Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony, but it was also a deeply gendered and class story with which future generations of dancers would have to engage. Women trained and certified by Sharp directed and shaped the American Branch and its successor, the Country Dance (and after 1964, Song) Society of America, until the late 1960s in his image: it remained a small and largely Anglophile community of well-heeled, white Anglo-Americans.

Part II picks up the story in midcentury with the emergence of the second folk revival. It continues the transnational center of this history but reverses the flow. As the first revival moved from England to the United States, square

dancing and new internationalist folk songs of the second revival transformed the English community, and they did so almost two decades before they revived the American movement. The key to the difference lay in both the internationalist political message central to the second folk revival and the particular virulence of the Cold War in the United States.

Part II begins with a counternarrative of a path *not* chosen by English Country dancers: International Folk Dance. This discussion builds on the idea that people are drawn to different folk dance traditions for different reasons and that they also invest the dances with their own meanings. The Nazis, for instance, invoked the *volk* as the spirit of Aryan superiority during the same decades that the communists celebrated the folk as carriers of an international proletarianism that could inform a radical political culture. Indeed, invocations of the folk could serve both nationalist and internationalist visions. Thus, in the 1950s, International Folk Dancers and ethnics at Polish American clubs could both dance the mazurka, but for each group the dance had vastly different meaning. For the former, it may have been the only Polish dance of some thirty dances done that evening and was an expression of the solidarity of people of many lands; for the latter, it was part of an evening of Polish dances dedicated to preserving “Polishness” until the homeland would be “liberated” from the communists.¹³

English Country Dance was in this context a national dance. An International Dance might teach the English dance “Hole-in-the-Wall,” but it would be followed by dances from other countries, such as a Russian two-step, a Hungarian czardas, an Irish set dance, or perhaps, the Scottish dance “Road to the Isles.” In Britain, English Country Dance expressed “Englishness,” not a broader Britishness, a reality that Celts such as British-Irish, Welsh, or Scottish nationals would not miss. In the United States, English Country Dance’s privileging of the English origins of the nation as a foundational Anglo-American national tradition similarly minimized participation by Irish Americans, who constituted large communities in eastern cities such as Boston and New York, where English dance groups flourished. Thus, English Country Dance in the United States existed in changing relationship to the International Dance alternative, at times hostile and at times sympathetic, and the politics of “internationalism” provided a challenging counterpoint to the more nationalist and avowedly apolitical politics of the English Country Dance community.

With the waning of the more virulent domestic constraints of the Cold War and the rise of the back-to-land counterculture in the early 1970s, a contra boom brought a new generation of young people into the Country Dance

and Song Society. It did not hurt that the infusion of these people coincided with new leadership of the American organization. The shift, however, followed changes that had transformed the dance scene in England. The English dance community lost many male dancers in the war, and the leader of the English Folk Dance and Song Society instituted a couples-only policy and began to emphasize square dance and less fussy “community” (or “traditional” or “barn”) dances that did not require much teaching or styling. American soldiers stationed in Britain popularized square dancing, but it was a photo of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip square dancing at a reception at Canada House that transformed the English dance scene. Thousands lined up to square dance at Cecil Sharp House in London, dramatically broadening the size and social profile of the community there. The new policies had implications for the future of the dance community, a theme explored in the last chapters of the book.

The story concludes, however, with the history of the new generation of people who transformed the American ECD community from the 1970s forward. Many dance newcomers had little or no family roots in England. Joining the dance from an international dance and song tradition, they had to remake the national tradition to serve them. One way they did so was by elaborating a new “modern” variant on the English dance tradition with new tempos, style, and embodiments for both older and newly written dances. In other ways, however, these newcomers resembled their predecessors in the English Country Dance movement. They, too, were a relative elite, but one drawn from a slightly different class of professional and technical workers. As significant was their political profile: they overwhelmingly self-identified as left-wing or liberal. In a neocon political world dominated by Thatcherism and Reaganism, where “liberal” had become a dirty “L Word,” the ECD community constituted a safe haven for these folks, a place apart. They took this place on the road, however. Reflecting the new consumerism of the era, the leisure time of the many older dancers, and the bourgeois preferences of this urbane class fraction, dancers participated in a national and even global dance community, traveling to weekly balls and to week-long dance camps across the country and on dance holidays abroad. And if they could not travel, they transported themselves by plugging into MP3 players and listening to CDs made by renowned English Country Dance bands.

The new, commodified English Country Dance experience may, however, have come at a steep price. The urban and suburban folk in the contemporary English Country Dance community worry about their ability to reproduce themselves, yet the consumer dance culture sends messages to outsiders of

the community's distinctiveness. For left-liberal and urbane English Country dancers remain enmeshed in the contradictions of the modern liberal imaginary: they identify with the city even as they exist in an uneasy place apart. The classical tunes that accompanied the dances and the leisure-world activities of the dance community remain affluent markers of the class fraction who promote the dance and do it as a recreational adjunct of their life, much as are the stately posture, gestures, attire, and conventions of the dance. These signifiers convey "white" and relatively elite messages about the English Country Dance community's class and culture. To be sure, the community broadened over the twentieth century, but its cultural markers sustain much of the penumbra of its Anglo-Saxon national origins. So although the fare for a contemporary local dance event is typically not extravagant, greater participation in dance community events raises both the cultural and financial ante. It remains to be seen, as the dance community seeks to expand its base, if and how it will engage the inclusive-exclusive contradictions of modern liberalism and, in doing so, determine its future.

