**Modern Folk Dance**

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## Summary

At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, revivalists resurrected the social practice of dances traditionally associated with rural and peasant (or village) peoples as a transnational modernizing project. They were typically professionals based in Northern European and United States cities. The social dance movements they spawned reworked or ‘invented’ the folk dances for the modern era in three related ways.    First, they participated in nationalist movements that embraced folk dances from local villages to forge a national identity.   This movement could be profoundly conservative, even inflecting the German fascist

imaginary in the *Volk.* But the folk movementwould also participate in mid-century internationalist left-wing alternatives to express proletarian solidarities with peasant peoples around the world.  Second, middle-class folk dance revivalists associated the city and its immigrant residents, who were often from rural areas, with vice, debauchery and sin and sought to expose urban immigrants to the simple, pristine, rural values expressed through these dances in order to assimilate them to the city into modern, civilized, urban dwellers.   And third, the folk dance revival participants sought to offer a counterweight to the rough working-class culture of the music hall, vaudeville theatres, and dance hall (etc.) and to celebrate a dance form that made its adherents into modern disciplined, heterosexual and bourgeois bodies.

## Beginnings

Modern folk dance is a turn of the twentieth-century revivalist practice based upon a participatory dance form originating within village-based ethnic communities of northern Europe. It arose as part of the effort to define the modern European nation-state in the last half of the nineteenth-century and gained most of its adherents in the U.S. and northern Europe. In the face of rapid industrialization, revivalists celebrated traditional dances with roots in the pre-modern medieval and renaissance eras that they associated with a pristine, rural idyll in order to revitalize subalterns who they imagined as a ‘foreign race’ and adapt it to modern life. Two ironies particularly marked this revival movement: revivalists re-imagined local village dances as national in provenance; and they led efforts to bring dances that expressed peasant or village cultures into urban contact points – settlements, playgrounds, schools – to instill rural immigrants with ‘appropriate’ bodily comportments for urban denizens. As part of an emergent professional class of folklorists, the revivalists expressed the middle-class, Protestant values of the Progressive and Edwardian eras. They infused folk dances with their vision of modernity, excising some parts such as kissing, ignoring traditions they thought too physically or emotionally expressive and thus plebian, and censoring dance-song titles they thought sexually provocative. More fundamentally, they ‘dressed up’ the village dances – literally performing them in bourgeois evening wear – and determined ‘authentic’ carriage and stepping with twentieth-century sensibilities. In sum, revivalists ‘invented’ a modern form of the folk dance.

The first folk dance collectors built on an emergent folklore practice pioneered by eighteenth-century folklore and song ‘catchers’ Early dance collectors travelled to local villages and observed dances but did little formal collecting. In the United Kingdom, Cecil James Sharp witnessed a Headington Morris side in 1899 and persuaded the leader, William Kimber, to help him transcribe the dance. In the next years, Sharp went to the West Country and transcribed with a notation system of his devising traditional village dances of the time. But in 1909, Sharp was fortunate enough to discover the eighteen editions of *The English Dancing Master* published by John Playford and his son between 1651 and 1728 in the British Library and transcribed, published and taught the dances found therein as the authoritative modern English Country Dance repertoire. Yet, the origin of the modern revival in folk dance in England equally belongs to Mary Neal. An ardent socialist and suffragette, Neal had established the Espérance Club and Social Guild for London working girls in the mid-1890s. Sharp introduced Neal to William Kimber and he, in turn, helped teach the girls Morris dancing for their annual Christmas pageant. In the next couple of years, Neal travelled to the English countryside to collect folk dances and created an Espérance Girls’ performance team. But the enthusiastic public reception of the girls’ performances had convinced Sharp to turn to dance instead of just song collecting. And while Neal and Sharp initially collaborated, the two ultimately competed for leadership of the nascent folk dance movement, with Sharp ultimately prevailing in 1911. That year, he exploited his professional connections to win the directorship of the Stratford Summer School for English Folk Dance and established his own demonstration team and organized the English Folk Dance Society, which remains to this day the authority on English folk dance.

File: mary\_neal.jpg

Figure Mary Neal

Source: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library collection. Copyright Lucy Neal.

## American Connections

Between 1914 and 1918 Sharp visited the United States for four extended lecture, teaching and collecting tours. In March 1915, he presided over the organization of the American Branch of the EFDS. This organization, the first permanent folk dance society in the United States, became the Country Dance and Song Society of America in 1964, during a second revival. Sharp played a major role in establishing in the United States the idea of an Anglo-American folk tradition when in 1917 he ‘discovered’ the Kentucky Running Set at the Pine Mountain settlement house during one of his extraordinary song and dance collecting trips. Ignorant of the heterogeneous African-American, German and Scotch-Irish origins of American backwoods culture, Sharp believed he had found a linear descendant of the English tradition preserved in the mountains.

While English Country Dance provided the most significant institutional base for modern folk dance until the middle of the twentieth century, one American revivalist in particular – Elizabeth Burchenal – advanced other national folk dance traditions as well, laying the groundwork for what would become an internationalist alternative folk dance movement. An educator, Burchenal travelled to northern and western Europe to collect national folk dances in villages. She studied with Sharp at Stratford-on-Avon. Later, she taught folk dance in 1903 at Teacher’s College, Columbia University, where she spearheaded its introduction as a core of their physical education training. Burchenal wrote dance manuals on folk dancing as a ‘social recreation’ and published books of dances from all the Scandinavian lands as well as from German, Bohemia, Russia and the British Isles, each as national traditions. As executive director of the Girls’ Branch of the New York Public Schools Athletic League and a leader of the Playground Association of America, she instituted modern folk dance as a key component in physical education.

This folk dance revival appealed to the mostly elite and middle-class reformers in the United States and United Kingdom. The emerging field of folklore studies represented by Burchenal and Sharp limited ‘the folk’ to Northern and Western European ‘peasant’ traditions that were transmitted orally. Dances of other racial and ethnic groups that folklorists deemed to be primitives were notably absent from folklore repertoires. Thus, modern folk dance emerged as Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and white, a legacy that marked its virtual exclusion of African and Asian dance, among many others. While revivalists in northern Europe revived folk dances to compliment the rise of modern nation states, Burchenal published collections of the folk dances of Scandinavia, Germany, Hungary, and the British Isles in the Unites States to further support a hyphenated Anglo-ethnic identity. The wild vertiginous turning dances of the tango craze and animal dances of the un-chaperoned urban American dance hall and its flowing liquor worried bourgeois reformers such as Burchenal. Against them, modern folk dance was presented as a healthy physical and moral alternative.

## A Second Revival

Two other notable moments punctuated the modern folk revivals – a postwar Second Folk [Dance] Revival, which began in the mid-1930s, and the late twentieth-century emergence of modern folk dance self-conscious of itself as an urban folk idiom in and for the present. The second revival reversed the trajectory of the first, which had brought Sharp to America. The Second Revival, growing out of Great Depression and leftist politics, originated in the U.S. It had more of an impact earlier in the U.K., however, where the Cold War was less virulent. In 1935, Maud Karpeles, Sharp’s devoted collaborator, organized the first international folk dance festival in London. Seeing the lively peasant dances from other countries at this festival convinced Douglas Kennedy, the Sharp demonstration dancer who succeeded him as Director of EFDS, that the ‘authentic’ English dance form needed more ‘fire’. In revivalist urban venues, the new repertoire of ‘kick-up-your heels’ *Ceilidhs* (and not the more ‘prissy’, stylized Playford dances) programmed square dances and traditional hornpipes, reels and rants still being done in the West and North of England. This second revival broadened the middle-class base of the English Country Dance community, but the repertoire remained in the English national tradition with a new younger crowd involved in the anti-nuclear campaign and social fervent of the era.

File: cecil\_james\_sharp.jpg

Figure Cecil James Sharp

Source: Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House in London. Permission may be sought from Librarian Malcolm Taylor.

In contrast, the Second Revival in the U.S. gave the modern folk dance revival a new internationalist impulse. In 1931, Mary Wood Hinman and an Italian folk dancer, Elsa Gursay, organized the New York Folk Festival Council, which sponsored events for dancers from many national dance traditions. Council events presented national dances performed by natives and descendants who self-identified with their tradition, but members of the audience began to ask to dance other people’s dances as an expression of an international self. By the end of the decade, international folk dance emerged coincident with depression-era political expressions of solidarity with the dispossessed and the rise of international folk songs of the ‘common man’. Participants took folk dances performed in nationalist venues – for instance, at the Polish-American National Hall – and invested them with new political meanings for a modern internationalist project where the voices and bodies of the 'little people' would build a more egalitarian society.

At the same time, depression-era modern dance choreographers and dancers gained inspiration from these folk dances. They included Doris Humphrey, who studied folk dance with Hinman, along with leading modern dancers of the era such as Ruth St Denis, Martha Graham, Sophie Maslow and Helen Tamaris, who incorporated folk dance into modern dance, notably during the New Deal, as a symbol for the proletarian spirit for the modern moment.

Nationalist folk dance groups continued in fascist countries like Germany (the Volk) and in postwar émigré anti-communist ethnic communities that sought to preserve a past. But in post-war America, international folk dance centers expanded under the leadership of ‘ethnic’-Americans: among the important leaders were Lithuanian-American Vytrutus (‘Vits’) Beliajus in Chicago, Chinese-American Song Chang in San Francisco, and the Ukrainian-Americans Michael and Mary Ann Herman in New York. The Cold War would make their work more difficult, especially in the hostile political culture of the postwar United States.

## Legacies

A final shift in modern folk dance occurred in last third of the twentieth century when contemporary sensibilities and political agendas refashioned the repertoire and embodiment of the dance. The international tradition lost its political traction and was literally balkanized in resurgent nationalisms. Some national traditions emerged, like Israeli folk dance, which burgeoned after the 1967 Sinai War, where participants invented new dances for a national culture in a beleaguered state. Others, like English Country Dance, moderated its tempos, privileging languid waltz-time dances in a new genre, Modern English Country Dance (MECD). No longer intent on only recovering the past, choreographers wrote and rewrote thousands of new dances in the historical style. In this modern idiom, through ‘the folk process’ – the way local people continually transform song, dance and tradition during its transmission – the modern folk dance community became itself the folk, an urban middle-class folk rooted in a nostalgic embrace of the rural past.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4XuvaYnbJo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4XuvaYnbJo" \t "_blank)

Figure Hungarian Dancing today.

The contemporary folk project differed from those of the preceding Second Revival generation. Committed to an alternative anti-materialist worldview, many contemporaries came out of the late 1960s folk culture of square and contra dance (both American cousins of English Country Dance) and international folk dance. For these people, the second revival represented less an oppositional cultural expression then an alternative social space. As urban iconoclasts committed to a more egalitarian modern society, the modern folk dance community remained mired in the contradictions of a modernist project rooted an anti-modern rural Western tradition. Modern cities were the homes of African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Latinos, but the modern folk dance community venue remained the home of affluent, professional-technical white folk, a haven of urbane urban progressives who found modern urban culture alienating.

**Further Reading**

(Boyes, 1993)

(Graff, 1997)

(Lausevic, 1998)

(Nielsen, 2011)

(Walkowitz, 2010)