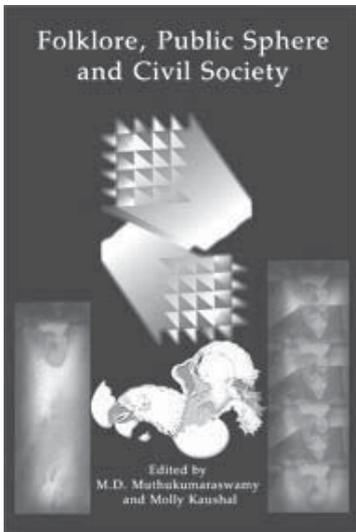


*Folklore, Public Sphere and Civil Society*  
Edited by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal  
Chennai : NFSC and IGNCNA, 2004, Pages x + 317

HERBERT REID



Herbert Reid is Professor of Political Science at The University of Kentucky where he has also served as Director of Environmental Studies and Director of the Appalachian Center. He may be reached at hgreid01@uky.edu.

The American political theorists Fred Dallmayr and Hwa Yol Jung — working with colleagues in various Asian countries — have taken the lead in advancing the timely enterprise of “comparative political theory”. Their recent separately edited volumes materialize tasks of “border crossings” that forge insights of “comparative political culture”. Working independently and in dialogue, each has made a durable contribution to moving Western political theory beyond Orientalism and Eurocentrism. Dallmayr’s *Beyond Orientalism* discusses Thomas Pantham’s comparative analysis of Habermas and Gandhi, attending especially to the extent they shared a critical-emancipatory concern with a revitalized public sphere promising a reduction of structural exploitation and violence. It is from this general vantage point that I am able to express great enthusiasm for this fascinating collection of folklore studies as a significant contribution to deepened understanding of public spheres in new formations of civil society and political co-existence.

The volume is brilliantly organized and introduced by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal, who rightly insist on the

importance of broadening the outreach of Habermasian notions of “public sphere” and “communicative action” (3). The 23 essays assembled here do a remarkable job of placing “folklore at the center of the public sphere” (2), a move that should be of much interest to those of us concerned with the critical reconstruction of public sphere theory. There is certain courage here in the recognition, quoting Alan Jabbour, that it “takes nothing away from folklore’s intracultural face to note that its intercultural face makes it a key cultural resource in the construction of a larger civil society” (22).

Most of the authors appear to share a combined sense of the momentous contribution of Habermas’ historical study of national public spheres and the limitations or biases of his communication theory neatly summarized in Eric Miller’s refreshingly hopeful paper that appropriately concludes the volume. In documenting such themes as the role of “performative folk traditions as public spheres” and the extent to which folk’s general culture remains at the deepest level of political institutions, the cumulative impact of these 23 studies (may I say their “rolling thunder”) is to remind that legitimacy crises, aggravated increasingly by corporate globalisation, will not soon abate. As Jawaharlal Handoo astutely suggests, folklorists are strategically situated to assist in the much needed “rethinking of the palace definitions of history and the subconscious structures of the palace paradigm which, besides the historian, people still collectively share” (62). I have to add that this contribution may have the remarkable virtue of helping explain both the recent Indian national election and the U.S.A. presidential election, although his point about popular hunger for kings (57) applies more to the latter. (America’s mainstream “palace paradigm specialists” would be, of course, unable to agree).

Y.A. Sudhakar Reddy makes the important point that in the wake of globalisation “the thin line between popular and folk culture is gradually fading away” (34). His observations on the *dalit* movement and the adaptation of their lore to new media environments follow a useful commentary on relevant theoretical perspectives including critical globalization studies by Harvey, Ritzer, and Bauman as well as Habermas. Roma Chatterji’s essay offers what probably is a more positive (and controversial) view of a transformative situation under the impact of commodification that some might call “hybridity.” The more significant issue may be the questions raised by Molly Kaushal’s paper: the movement from mythic to political identities, the possibility of counter-hegemonic voices, the contest and competition of multiple public spheres (194). As a matter of fact, Kaushal’s essay begins by marking this volume’s contribution vis-à-vis Habermas’ public sphere theory: its failure to “take cognizance of a genuine public sphere within the framework of traditional societies” (186). It is especially here that Kailash K. Mishra’s contribution on the “Chaupal as

Multidimensional Public Space" garners importance. Mishra's discussion of Gandhi's roots in the chaupal and his contribution to the *Panchayati Raj* deserves highlighting in exactly this context.

Pulak Dutta's essay on Tagore's experimental application of the "principles of the cooperative movement" at Santiniketan is at once candid and suggestive. The editors alertly re-formulate Dutta's point about Santiniketan as a "third space" as a challenge for an inescapably interventionist folklore. I must also quote Dutta's observation that at Santiniketan conscious attempts were made "to keep a flow of aesthetic sensibility in the objects of daily use" (165). This challenge of "recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" is at the center of John Dewey's philosophy of *Art as Experience* (1934:10) and critically important for his theory of democracy.

A number of scholars (e.g. Bilimale on folk theatre of Karnataka and Khanna on Tamil Nadu's traditional theatre) suggest ways in which performative folk traditions relate to the development of democratic public space(s). Alas, it is impossible for me to comment on each and every contribution to this volume. As a student of politics, I must say there is an impressive grasp by many authors of the political relevance or implication of what Michael Nijhawan calls "processes of discursive resignification" (269). Mention must also be made of Anjali Capila's account of the role of folk songs in women's lives in the Garhwal Himalayas and their issue-based, dynamic, and changing nature. This collection documents an amazing range of expressive space and performative tradition involved in the generation of public opinion. In doing so we are reminded of the unfortunate degree to which national histories tend to operate under monolithic concepts of social time and action. However, those of us interested in expanding the enterprise of comparative political theory would do well to pay sustained attention to the public sphere of folklore.

HERBERT REID  
*Professor of Political Science*  
University of Kentucky  
U.S.A.