

## Folk- as construction

In "Att konstruera ett folk: Föreställningar om folkbegreppet inom svensk folkbildning", Henrik Nordvall (2005) analyses the prefix, *folk-* in different usages. The correct translation of *Folk-* here might be *the people*, I use the concept *folk-* as in folk-dance for what Nordvall (2005) is writing as *folk-* in Swedish. Nordvall explores what it means for the use of the concept in public education (folkbildning) in Sweden. He writes that what is meant by *folk-* is often commented briefly in unclear ways. At closer examination of the concept and its varying meanings, it turns out that they are far from trivial (Nordvall 2005, 2).

The question of who is included and excluded, from the collective that is referred to by folk, holds a strong political force. Both the nation-state and liberal democracy, as well as social movements of various kinds, are intimately intertwined with notions of folk- in various ways: Folk- who constitute nations; folk- in control; folk- who are rebels and make revolution; folk- as the superior race.

(Nordvall 2005, 2 *my translation*)

Under the heading "The Mass, Liberal Democracy and the Colonial Legacy", Nordvall writes that the use of *folk-* as a concept for mobilization and formation of communities has been questioned as a result of postcolonial criticism showing how it involves exclusion and the use of power (Nordvall 2005, 12). He writes that it is generally known that colonial and racist thinking, was widespread in 1930s and 1940s Germany, but that it is much less noticed that notions of *folk-*, generated a colonial racist exclusion of people also in liberal democracies (ibid). Democracy and European "civilized" nation-states were established, with parallel notions of a civilized culture of folk, shaped as a counter-image to the primitive indigenous peoples, "the Others". Furthermore, Nordvall writes that it was not only people in the colonies who came to represent the primitive and uncivilized. With industrialization and the emergence of an urban working class, the fear among the bourgeoisie grew that the masses or the mob would threaten the foundations of society. Approaches built on ideas that it takes a completely different perspective to understand the barbaric masses than to understand the rational individual (ibid). Nordvall highlights the concept *cultural racism* from post-colonial theory to term the approach that "create divisions and hierarchies between different groups based on notions of culture as a static essence" (Nordvall 2005, 16 *my translation*).

## Folk-, in contemporary times

A perspective that Nordvall highlights is that

a time-blind or an ahistorical hindsight is easily created, where an interpretation of the past is made without regard to historical context. In worst case, it can result in a blinding complacency that prevents one from seeing similar features in one's own contemporary world of ideas.

(Nordvall 2005, 16 *my translation*)

At best, such historical descriptions can instead build a critical awareness that contemporary values and figures of thought often are taken uncritically for granted (ibid).

To me, Nordvall's analysis takes a constructive direction that inspires to make visible and reflect on how it is possible to live and act today, and to consider how bodily practices such as dance and choreography can problematize the contemporary agenda and see how awareness and self-criticism can process structures through bodily knowledge. At the end, Nordvall states:

It is not given that "folk" must refer either to a blue-eyed Swedish racial community, to function as a term for social groups in the exploitation of global capitalism or other meanings. Communities and collectives, as well as notions of them, are something that is constantly being formed and re-formed. One way to understand this mechanism is to imagine a social, political, linguistic process through which meanings are constructed. Thus, "Folk" is a concept that acquires meanings through a negotiation process. Its meanings are not given in advance by a particular economic, geographical or "race-based" order. An awareness of this creates the opportunity for a critical questioning of how this construction takes place. Which groups are excluded? What will be the norm? In this way, power relations can be made visible and strategies may be developed, that either offers resistance or promote an alternative order of power.

(Nordvall 2005, 20 *my translation*)

Nordvall, Henrik. 2005. "Att konstruera ett folk: Föreställningar om folkbegreppet inom svensk folkbildning." In *Folkbildning – samtidig eller tidlös?*, edited by Ann-Marie Laginder, Inger Landström, 311-336. Linköping: Mimer/ Skapande vetande.