Moses Asch’s contribution to American ethnomusicology or, utility and toy, authenticity and entertainment in a United State

Toward an Anthropological History of Folkways Records

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“Those companies who fail to take advantage of every opportunity of pushing the legitimate side of their business, relying only on the profits derived from the ‘coin-in-the-slot,’ will find too late that they have made a fatal mistake. The ‘coin-in-the-slot’ device is calculated to injure the phonograph in the opinion of those seeing it only in that form, as it has the appearance of being nothing more than a mere toy, and no one could comprehend its value or appreciate its utility as an aid to businessmen and others for dictation purposes when seeing it only in that form”. (Thomas Alva Edison, cited in Gelatt 1977: 45, emphasis mine).

“The student of ethnomusicology will not devote much time to his subject before being confronted by ‘Ethnic Folkways Library,’ a series published by the ‘Folkways Corporation’ which contains that company’s output of greatest authenticity, in contrast to its large number of entertainment issues”. (Nettl 1964: 56, emphasis mine)

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1 A previous version of this text was published in a book edited by Gabriele Berlin and Artur Simon (Berlin and Simon eds. 2002). It is based on a research done at Smithsonian Institution’s Office of Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies during my term there as a Research Fellow. See Menezes Bastos 1994 for the original proposal of the research, and 1995 and 2002 for some of its results. Thanks to Anthony Seeger, Peter Seitel, Jeff Place and the other colleagues of the cited Office for their invaluable support. Thanks also to the Institution itself for the fellowship and the conditions of work that made it possible to conduct the research. Thanks finally to the anonymous reviewers appointed by Vibrant. Of course that I alone am responsible for the text.

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Marx said that the product only can reach its final form - its "consummation" in his words - through consumption, for only then is its transformation from a mere potential product into an actual one possible. "A railway on which no one travels, which is therefore not used, not consumed", he argues, "is potentially but not actually a railway". The same principle applies to "phonography" - or, the domain of sound recording - , and particularly to its application in ethnomusicology. Increasingly, ethnomusicologists are discovering that not only the recordings they make but also the intentionalities, techniques and even the machines that produce them are being radically transformed through their use by the peoples and groups studied by the discipline - typically the previously so called "primitives" -, who were often assumed to be simply passive. In this manner, "natives" of all types are being able to actively include phonography in their own histories. This is happening not only with phonography but also with other arts of reproduction/communication such as photography and video, not to speak about the internet. As to video, in Brazil its appropriation by some Indian groups has been extremely important since the 1980’s and even before (see Turner 1993, Gallois and Carelli 1995). Particularly involving the Xinguano Indians and phonography, a native ethnomusicology - based typically on cassette recordings - has existed since at least the late 1960’s (Menezes Bastos 1999: 67, 96-97, n. 59). More recently, the Xinguano have had a general disposition toward the universe of show (Mello 2003). Also in Brazil, the production of discs by Indian communities with the help of many types of allies is becoming increasingly common (Montardo 1999, Coelho 2004).

The point in discussion has a long tradition in anthropology (and sociology), since at least Veblen (1965 [1904]) and Mauss (1974 [1923-1924]), and

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4 See Seeger, guest ed. 1997 for a collection of essays approaching the appropriation of phonography by Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. Included in the collection, consult Koch (1997), about the cases of the Alyawarra and other peoples of Australia and the Torres Strait, for whom songs (as well as myths and rituals) can be equated with "our" land maps, their recordings being presented as proofs of land ownership in legal causes. See Brady (1999) about the impact of the phonograph in anthropology and folklore.
5 See the part dedicated to Indigenous peoples of Instituto Socioambiental’s website (http://www.socioambiental.org/) for information related to Brazil about CDs and videos. See also the website of the organization "Vídeo nas Aldeias" (http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/), for the program with the same name, involving Indian authorship.
an extremely strong present appeal. Under this standpoint, it can be read in
a more general way, that of anthropology of consumption and communica-
tion, not reduced to traditional societies and to the arts or techniques of re-
production. The general question put by the point is the agency of the con-
sumer (Miller 1987) and the “receiver” of media products (Rial 2004). Under
a yet more general point of view, the topic in comment is the agency of the
subject situated in the dominated and exploited pole of an asymmetrical so-
cial-political relationship, an agency much often rejected by many stud-
ies, particularly those with a culturalist and – in the case of media studies -
Adornian inspiration.

Here is not the place to develop this theme in terms of the famous
Foucault/ Habermas debate about modernity (see Kelly ed. 1995), a debate
that originally did not include the question of how the process of moderniza-
tion has had particularly catastrophic consequences for traditional peoples,
particularly the Indigenous (Bastos 2000: 46-47). Is a pluralistic democra-
cy possible? Or a planetary one, based on a world-wide consensus achiev-
able thorough communicative action? Or will a pluralistic democracy - in
terms typical of its modern construction of the relationship between reason
and power –escape becoming a domination project? I would say that present-
ly at least such a democracy is simply elusive, in spite of all the efforts of the
Indigenous peoples and their allies to maintain it in their political agenda as
an irreducible utopia. But of course that there exists some light at the end of
the tunnel toward its conquest. I will briefly approach here one aspect of the
work of one individual - Moses Asch - who very seriously contributed toward
the democratization of ethnomusicological phonography.

The present paper aims to present some of the results of the research re-
ferred to previously (see note 1). My concern here will be Ethnic Folkways

6 The works of authors such as Sahlins (2003 [1976]), Douglas and Isherwood (2004 [1979]), Rocha
(2002), McCracken (2003), Horst and Miller (2006), among many others, have shown this.

7 In the case of the so called “studies of contact” (in Brazil, “estudos de contato”) involving modern
nation states and traditional societies, the contributions by Sahlins (since 1985) are crucial. See Albert
and Ramos, eds. (2002) for analysis approaching lowland South American Indigenous societies. About
Adorno particularly in music, see Middleton (1990). My text of 1996 contains a critique to culturalism
in “studies of contact”.

8 Under the label not specifically of modernization but rather of colonialism, these studies abound
in anthropology (see, for example, Taussig 1987).
Library, the distinguished series of Moses Asch’s celebrated Folkways Records Company, which has been dedicated to the dissemination of traditional music. My central point is two fold:

1. This series performed an extremely important role towards the public legitimation of American ethnomusicology. It offered the discipline and its professionals an adequate channel - commercial but at the same time academically honorable - for their communication with the society at large. This channel strongly contributed to the recognition of ethnomusicology’s social value.

2. Conversely, Asch’s career, which culminated in his probable standing as the most important individual cultural broker of traditional music in the world, found its decisive source of legitimation in American ethnomusicology. It was largely through ethnomusicology’s voice - science’s voice - that Asch’s work as a whole (though originally through the cited record series), received the crucial certificate of authenticity (as opposed to entertainment), as the epigraph by Bruno Nettl in the beginning of this article shows.

The inclusive scenario of both movements of this mutual relationship - involving “Mr. Folkways” and the American ethnomusicological community, including the Society of Ethnomusicology - was typical of the domain of traditional music (labeled ethnic music) in the United States during the time under consideration here. The period involved in this research begins in the late 1940’s, with the foundation of the Ethnic Folkways Library – during the time not properly of ethnomusicology but of comparative musicology - and closes in the late 1980’s, with Asch’s national American consecration and the purchase by Smithsonian Institution of the entire Folkways Records collection.

9 The label “ethnomusicology” – previously spelled “ethno-musicology”, with a hyphen - dates from the 1950’s. Before it the field was known in the United States through the expression “comparative musicology” (in German, vergleichende Musikwissenschaft) [see my texts of 1991 and 1995).

10 See my text of 1995 for a study about American ethnomusicology and its public legitimation, whose consolidation dates from the 1960’s.

11 The certification of authenticity is based in the fact that the recordings of the collection were “curated” by a presumed expert – typically an ethnomusicologist, folklorist or anthropologist - like a museum ethnographic exhibit. In Asch’s words, the recordings are “…all done by anthropologists or governmental departments of music. All the records are done scientifically, they’re not just put together” (see Capaldi, ed.1978b: 4). Of course that categories such as authenticity are problematic. This is not the reason though to put them in the trash. On the other hand, I understand authenticity in this paper as a native category, opposed to that one of entertainment – the only way to comprehend the black dresses of the widow is to put them in counterpoint with the white ones of the bride (as Leach one time taught).

12 See http://www.folkways.si.edu/index.html, the website where Smithsonian Institution houses the collection. See also Smithsonian’s website, www.smithsonianglobalsound.org., which includes
The research in question is a part of my long-term project aiming at an articulated anthropology of ethnomusicology and phonography (see Menezes Bastos 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2002). In the referred project, I have approached phonography as a profoundly moving symbolic universe in the West. Here phonography seems to be linked with a teleology which departs from the originally frozen state of the Other’s voice towards its warming up, this voice including music and speech. This teleological paradigm is based on a myth narrated in a passage of Rabelais’ *Pantagruel*: at the limits of the “civilized” world, envisioned by 16th century Western cosmology as extremely cold and inhabited only by barbarians and monsters, both speech and music - emblems of the state of humanity within this cosmology - were audible only when the snow stones that had recorded and stored them were heated up. I have seen this myth, the Renaissance’s heir of a tradition that seems to be deeply anchored in classical Greek mythology, as the cultural postulation of the phonograph. The symbology of this magic machine seems to have to do here with the transformation of barbarians and monsters into civilized or - in that system of thought - “proper” human beings. To recall Lévi-Strauss’ categories, phonography would be a process whose acquisition would turn “cold” societies into “warm” ones.

To close this summary of the long-term project involving phonography, it is worth noting that the public recognition of American ethnomusicology’s social value always was dependent on its capacity to produce authentic recordings. The second epigraph quoted at the beginning of this article, taken from Bruno Nettl’s *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*, points to what such a type of phonography could mean as opposed to that linked with the world of entertainment. Authentic phonographies, inside the inclusive system of thought, would be the distinctive output of scientifically disciplined work whose project would be the faithful reproduction of the Other’s voice, this being guaranteed - as said before - by the fact that the referred phonographies were “curated” by experts, being similar to museum ethnographic exhibits. Entertainment phonographies, on the other hand, would typically...

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many Folkways recordings, among them many on the music of Indigenous societies of lowland South America, including Brazil. There are two other Folkways Records collections, made up of copies of the original at Smithsonian: at the University of Alberta in Edmonton (Alberta, Canada) and at Indiana University in Bloomington.

13 It was Tinhorão (1981: 13) who called my attention to this episode. See my texts of 1990 and 1995.
be the result of *commercially* oriented phonographic production, without any compromise in *fidelity* to the otherness of the Other’s voice. Note that the epigraph under consideration comes from an illustrious handbook of American ethnomusicology, an extremely important classic for the field’s consolidation in that country. Nettl’s 1964 publication - *qua* handbook (Kuhn 1975: 29-30) - is one of the texts through which the discipline could both demonstrate and achieve its maturity in theory, method and techniques. It is also interesting to note how Nettl’s pair of opposition *authenticity/entertainment* parallels that present in the first quotation, by Thomas Alva Edison: *utility* (sometimes also called *tool/toy*). This latter opposition echoes the heated discussions involving Emile Berliner and Edison at the end of the 19th century regarding the vocation of phonography. It is my opinion that Asch’s geniality can be measured first of all by his capacity to break these dichotomies, showing that, yes, it is possible to produce *entertainment* with *authenticity* and *authenticity* with *entertainment*. Furthermore, he also transformed what could have been just one more archive - opened only to researchers - into a commercial corporation, Folkways Records, through which ethnomusicological recordings were made public commodities. Differently from museums, where the works of humankind are almost immediately presentified by their visual and tactile presence, archives are places in which the cited works (typically written documents and recordings of music and speech) have to be excavated - through reading and playing/listening - to be made present.

Moses Asch was born in Poland in 1905 of Jewish parents. He died in 1986 in New York. His father was Sholem Asch, the celebrated Yiddish writer nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1933. His mother, Matilda Spiro Asch, came from a family of socialist revolutionaries. Living in Poland was very difficult for the Asches, fighting against the Russian Czarist regime both because of their being Jews as well as socialist activists. Due to this combination of identities, they were forced to emigrate to France in 1912. As a consequence though of the First World War, they moved to the United States in 1917.

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14 The quotation is a part of a text by Edison himself published in the first issue of The Phonogram (in January of 1891), the official publication of Thomas Alva Edison Inc. (see Gelatt 1977: 45).

15 For the cited discussion, see Gelatt (1977). Note that Berliner, the inventor of the gramophone, defended the position that the main vocation of phonography was in the domain of entertainment, it was a toy in Edison’s words, not a utility or tool.

16 For a sensible biographic note about Asch, see his obituary written by Pete Seeger (1988).
From 1923 to 1925, Moses Asch studied sound and radio electronics in the Electronic High School (Elektronische Hochschule) at the Technical School in Bingen-am-Rhein (Rheinisches Technikum), Germany.

In his important study about Asch, Goldsmith (1998) says that Asch’s interest in traditional music, articulated with his self-construction as an American, dates from these two crucial years in Germany. As he later recalled, his colleagues there (who included people from many parts of Europe and South America, including Brazil) did not recognize the United States as a place “with culture”. In his son’s words:

“He was born in Poland, the son of Sholem Asch (the distinguished Yiddish novelist) but moved to New York at an early age, and he felt an immense identification with the U.S. culturally, though not politically. He liked that melting-pot dynamic in which different cultures could express themselves. While in Germany he ran across John Lomax’s trailblazing book (Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads) and realized that there was a culture in America, and one he could begin working on”. (see Charles 1989: 16, emphasis mine)

Following his maternal socialist inheritance, Asch’s not political identification with the United States was expressed by an inherently critic position regarding the American establishment. In his own words, he was a “goddamn anarchist” (Goldsmith 1998: 4). Though he never was an affiliate of the Communist Party, he was linked to many of its members and of the left in general. Additionally, since its foundation in 1946, he was a sponsor of the famous People’s Songs, a movement of the left promoting the use of music – particularly folk music - for political means (Goldsmith 1998: 174-179). Pete and Toshi Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Tom Glazer, Alan Lomax, Bess Hawes were among the members of the movement, which reached the McCarthy era, dominated by a generalized repression in the fields of culture and the arts

17 My appreciation goes to Peter D. Goldsmith for his kindness and extensive consideration paid to my research project about Folkways Records. Also about Asch and Folkways Records, see Olmsted (2003).
18 This text is also available at http://www.ualberta.ca/ALUMNI/history/affiliate/89winfolkways.htm (accessed in February 25, 2008). Moses Asch’s son is anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Michael Asch, Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta (see Asch 2003, an interview he gave about Folkways Records and his father).
19 See Seeger (2003) about the repression suffered during the referred era by members of his family such as his grandfather Charles Seeger, one of the founders of American comparative musicology.
Yet about Asch’s period of study in Germany, note that in the early 1920’s that country was in a vanguard position regarding the radio and phonographic industries and technologies, much of these being linked to Germany’s major cinematographic entrepreneurship. Additionally, Germany was also experiencing the emergence of Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft (comparative musicology) during the time under consideration.20

In 1928 Asch married Frances Ungar and in 1930 he established his first business in New York, called “Radio Laboratories”. The firm began with radio repairs and installations in general, but soon it became involved with the production of radio systems for theater and public events such as political campaigns, these typically linked to left-wing organizations. By the late 1930’s, his company had aspired to produce transcribed radio programs. It was through these programs that Asch finally entered the business of American folk music recording, which however only became possible in the early 1940’s.

Though 1947 is the founding year of Folkways Records proper (Cohen and Wells 1982: 234), Ethnic Folkways Library (or EFL) had its beginnings prior to that date, as it was initially based on fieldwork recordings made by the self-trained ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander in Haiti, Cuba and Eritrea. Courlander, at the time a close friend of George Herzog (who was then at Columbia University and a friend of Asch as well), offered Asch his recordings21. The latter not only accepted them for release but also founded EFL, making Courlander its editor.

What could be EFL’s place inside the market of ethnic music in the United States during this period under consideration? Note that from its beginnings in the 19th century up to the 1930’s and 1940’s, the American recording industry first concentrated on Italian opera and later on dancing jazz as its main successful genres (Gelatt 1977). There was also a very early – since the time of wax cylinders recordings - and widespread marketing of ethnic music to the many different ethnicities in the country. Unlike EFL ones will be, these re-

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20 Thanks to Tiago de Oliveira Pinto for an important conversation regarding these points. See my text of 1995 for a study which includes German vergleichende Musikwissenschaft.

21 Herzog was then one of Boas’ students in Columbia University. He was one of the German immigrants previously pertaining to the field of vergleichende Musikwissenschaft in Germany. Note that he immigrated to the United States not alone but taking with him the Phonogramm-Archiv’s phonograms (see my text of 1995). After, Herzog taught ethnomusicology at Indiana University in Bloomington, Bruno Nettl being one of his students.
cordings were not “curated” by experts, being intended to serve exclusively as entertainment means for the groups themselves. Since the beginning, though, ethnic music constituted only a small portion of the entire universe of the American recording industry (Spottswood 1982). On the other hand, it is noteworthy that during the 1930’s and 1940’s EFL was not the only label in the U.S. dedicated to ethnic music (Nettl 1964; Cohen and Wells 1982).22

The audience that formed the EFL’s market was divided into two main categories. On the one side were specialists such as folklorists, comparative musicologists, musicians and educators. Through EFL’s recordings, this public was in search of the collected traditions’ authenticity. This search was conducted from the territory of a scientific thought which believed in its own neutrality (the crucial value of its own authenticity) and which envisaged tradition as something that could be congealed in time and space through the magic of a machine. The second kind of EFL customer included proper aficionados, a universe that comprised members of many ethnic minorities who were afraid to lose their authenticity in regard to their original identities but who were simultaneously in the process of shifting their imaginations to an American identity (Moloney 1982). It is in this general context that EFL’s inception should be regarded: the unique output of Folkways Records brought about a pioneering process at the time in the United States, for it supplied the market with simultaneously authentic and entertainment recordings, a market where ethnicity was in the interest of both scientific and commercial aims.

During the 1950’s Asch’s involvement with ethnomusicology and vice versa deepened greatly, the measure of this being EFL’s development itself. By the end of that decade (1958), the number of documented Indigenous musics of the world reached about 150. During the 1970’s, this number jumped to about 700.23 The large majority of these issues were produced based on state-of-the-art ethnomusicological fieldwork, which is reflected in the high quality both of the recordings and of their accompanying notes. About the involvement in consideration, it is worth recalling that Asch was present at the American Anthropological Association meetings of 1953, where Herskovits, McAllester, Nettl, Rhodes and others discussed for the first time the founda-

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22 Differently from the other labels, though, EFL (and Folkways in general) included unpopular titles as Asch did not allow them to go out of print. He was proud of this (see Capaldi 1978b: 3).

23 The cited amounts are estimates, resulting from my own counting in the EFL’s printed catalogues of the late 1960’s and 1970’s.
tion of the Society for Ethnomusicology, an event which took place in 1955. Asch’s relationships with the then called International Folk Music Council\textsuperscript{24} were also extremely relevant. To sum up, the system of mutual relationships involving Asch and the ethnomusicological community - at a time when its center of production was consolidating its moving from Germany to the United States - was extremely important. During the 1960’s this situation reached a level of clear recognition of Asch’s work by the ethnomusicological circle in the United States. This is very clear from Nettl’s statement from the opening of this paper.

During the 1980’s this recognition led to Asch’s American national consecration, as can be demonstrated through the analysis of the process that resulted in the acquisition of Folkways Records by the Smithsonian Institution in 1987. Prestigious ethnomusicologists such as Robert Garfias (in 1987, president of the Society of Ethnomusicology), Anthony Seeger, David McAllester, Bruno Nettl, Mantle Hood and others were called to evaluate Folkways Records. They all responded emphatically, the main content of their evaluation of the entire collection being exactly the value of authenticity that had originally emanated from EFL\textsuperscript{25}. At the governmental front, the purchase involved Smithsonian Institution as a whole, since the Office of FolkLife Programs up to its direction, and it was led by folklorist Ralph C. Rinzler, then Smithsonian’s assistant secretary for public service. The acquisition was made with the commitment to maintain the characteristics of the collection - including in keeping all of its titles “in print” -, and to expand it under this rule.

To close, I will recall Edison’s and Berliner’s words once more and suggest that the last consequences of this intriguing juncture (utility/toy) seem to distinguish one of the United States’ contributions to Western civilization. Here this country is the home par excellence of show business, or of the encounter of true toys (show) dressed as absolutely true utilities (business), and vice versa. Regarding traditional music’s inclusion in this universe, Asch’s role was absolutely unique, EFL being his ethnomusicological anchor. This anchor’s best legacy was obtained through Asch’s surpassing the dichotomous form

\textsuperscript{24} Presently the cited Council is labeled International Council for Traditional Music.

\textsuperscript{25} It was Anthony Seeger who was chosen to direct the department in charge of the Folkways collection at Smithsonian Institution, from 1988 to 2000.
of thinking which developed authenticity into an opposed cultural phenomenon in relationship to entertainment. Asch’s genius put them together - in a united state - in America.

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