# Traditional Transmission as Cultural Commons: The Conflicts and Crisis of Commodification

Anthony McCann
Doctoral Candidate
University of Limerick
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The roots of some of the problems which now engage the specialized attention of academic philosophers and the roots of some of the problems central to our everyday social and practical lives are one and the same. (Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 36)

My entry into the field of common property studies was the result of a quick word search with an internet search engine. Preliminary outreach in my area of study, the impact of copyright application in Irish traditional music culture, led me gratefully to an area that seemed from the very first to be potentially very fruitful. And so it has turned out. Much of my research has overlapped with many of the concerns of common-pool resources: questions of reciprocity (see, for example, Hayashi, et al. 1998; King 1994; Oakerson 1988; Ostrom 1998; Peterson 1993; Prakash 1998), cooperation (see, for example, Bish 1998; Das and Teng 1998; Jones and George 1998; Kollock 1998; Ostrom and Walker 1991), normativity (see, for example, Graeber 1997; Ostrom 1986a; Ostrom 1995), community (see, for example, Becker and Gibson 1996; Bhattacharyya 1995; Cohen 1998; Freie 1998; Hess 1996; Ribot 1998), and property (see, for example, Gardner, et al. 1990; Hann 1998; Heller 1998; Heller 1999; Nguiffo 1998; Ostrom 1986b; Ostrom 2000; Waldron 1990).

From the start, however, I was a little uneasy with the predominance of economic discourse in this field where I was little more than an intellectual trespasser, (as much of my research elsewhere has been, for example in fields of law, sociology, and anthropology). Largely this was a result of my lack of familiarity with the terminology, the discourse that framed the

subject matter. Initially approaching the music as a resource, I began to apply the IAD framework (see, for example, Hess 1995; Lam, et al. 1997; Ostrom 1999; Polski and Ostrom 1998) to my analysis of traditional music, gauging issues of subtractability and non-excludability, and paddling in the pool of public goods analysis [see, for example, \Berge 1994 #504; Baden, 1998 #65; Buchanan, 1970 #501; Nitzan, 1989 #314]. I told myself that in time I would get to grips with the terminology and the concepts, and that, in time, I too would be able to discuss the economic wherewithal of Irish traditional music transmission with the best of them.

My unease of late has run a little deeper. I have become aware through my reading of the way that discourse frames and brackets reality (see, for example, Barnes and Duncan 1992; Foucault 1972; Macdonell 1986; McCarthy 1996; Ostrom 1993; Ostrom and Ostrom 1997), of the way in which divisions will obscure at least as much as they clarify. I have become aware of the way in which much of the discourse concerning traditional culture and hence Irish traditional music has been, for the most part, largely misrepresentative (see, for example, Calhoun 1983), often approaching tradition through the lens of reinvention (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Through my work with the Smithsonian Institution, as a research collaborator, and UNESCO, as the co-organiser of a recent World Conference on the Safeguarding of Traditonal Culture, and more importantly, perhaps, in my everyday dealings in the lifeworld of Irish traditional music, I have become aware of the dangers of over-reification (see, for example, Lukács 1971) and over-objectification (see, for example, Bourdieu 1977) when dealing with questions of knowledge transmission, where the most important thing is the always-already social, the interaction between people, the overarching principles that act as a touchstone to maintain a particular quality of human relationship. All too easily we can give

in to the relentless gravity of language and concept within our dominant discourses as it draws us towards the centrality of 'the thing'.

Central to my work at present is the metaphor of the *vector*, drawn from mechanics and mathematics, and often used in the context of disease transmission. The core idea for my purposes is that there are lines or vectors of power-knowledge (Foucault 1980; Foucault 1990; Foucault 1991) within discourse, that to all intents and purposes appear to act independently of each other, but which, on closer analysis, serve to reinforce each other, all the while contributing to a larger and more systemic effect. Often vectors are grouped within discourse around the premises of a particular epistemology, thereby contributing to a sheltering episteme (Foucault 1972) or paradigm (Kuhn 1974) through which all things are interpreted.

In the area of copyright, with which I have been most concerned, we find a developed, rich discourse of depth and history (see, for example, Rose 1993; Sherman 1997). We find vectoral elaborations of individuality, authorship, creativity, originality, the literary and artistic work, and capitalism (see, for example, Bettig 1996; Frith 1993; Jaszi 1991; Jaszi 1994; Posey and Dutfield 1996; Woodmansee 1984; Woodmansee 1994), among many others, which seem to come from different places, and none of which seem to be the whole story, but which somehow overlap and reinforce each other's central concerns. From everyday speech to complex legal elaborations the bigger picture of the discourse of copyright can be retraced and rebuilt with a little bit of detective work. Copyright and its supporters club of concepts take their place within a fairly limited set of interpretations about how the world works, an overly objectified, overly reified, overly propertised landscape, populated largely by persons alike, governed by the drives and motivations of self-interest and rational

choice. A tendency towards positivism finds no challenges or contradictions within this and similar worldviews as the arrow of time moves onwards in the service of progress and the expansion of capital.

The world of traditional transmission finds no place here. Copyright, individuality, authorship, creativity, originality, the literary and artistic work, and the accumulation of capital, have developed as cultural constructions within particular cultural practices and particular registers of human life which have not arisen from the way the world works in traditional transmission practices (see, for example, Jabbour 1982; Malm 1998; Mills 1996; Posey and Dutfield 1996; Seeger 1992). As a result many conflicts have arisen, from personal difficulties among musicians, conflicting definitions of what does or does not constitute a 'traditional' song, to national confusion and institutional wranglings involving the National Vintners Federation of Ireland, the overarching body for pubs and bars, the Irish Music Rights Organisation, and recently, Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann, a cultural nationalist body which claims to represent Irish traditional music worldwide (see McCann 1998, 1998b, 1999). Each of these conflicts in its own way acts as an 'epiphany' (Denzin 1989) in the sense that it serves as a fulcrum moment, a meeting of discourses, a window through conflict into the clearer terrain of analysis. In these conflicts, detailed in my thesis [McCann, forthcoming], it becomes clear that there is an alternative discourse, that traditional transmission and the people at its heart, present an alternative perspective on their own behalf.

I am concerned that the application of neo-classical economics (see, for example, Burke 1997; Burke 1993), or even of institutional analysis, in this context will prevent us from fully understanding the nature of traditional transmission as a cultural commons. I am concerned that speaking in terms of resources, or property, for example, will provide my work with an

overly reified, overly objectified framework which will become self-perpetuating and self-referential before I have come to an analysis of the way that traditional culture works on its own terms. I am concerned that a framework that predominantly concerns itself with things rather than practices may not be the best place to start when attempting to understand the roots of an impending cultural crisis within traditional transmission, and that such a framework would possibly even compound the problem.

I still believe, however, that my concerns *are* mirrored in the work of common property studies, hence my presence at this conference. I have, however, made a choice. In attempting to represent the voices and lives of the people with whom I have worked, and with whom I have sung and played, and in an attempt to come to a rearticulation of the practices in which they engage, I have found the need to turn to standpoint theory (Harding 1991). Drawing from a marxist, feminist perspective, standpoint theory attempts to represent people's lives from where they are, in order that the research that results is less false, rather than by imposing a predominantly alien, highly rationalized framework in the cause of understanding. My own perspective here owes much to the work of Sandra Harding in her feminist critique of science, *Whose Science?*, *Whose Knowledge?: Thinking From Women's Lives* (1991). She writes,

It is widely recognized in the social studies of science that although fewer scientists, philosophers, and social scientists who model their work on the natural sciences are as openly enthusiastic about positivism than was the case forty and more years ago, most of these people still happily embrace fundamental assumptions of positivism. As philosopher Roy Bhaskar has astutely observed, positivism still represents the unreflective "consciousness of science." (1991:79)

Working from the principle that knowledges and beliefs are socially situated and socially constructed, what I identify as *traditional* standpoint theory recognises the distinctive contribution which traditional culture has to make to research methods and epistemology.

Traditional standpoint theory accepts that traditional culture offers an alternative, a window to the otherwise. Traditional standpoint theory accepts that traditional cultural practices are a contemporary response to contemporary conditions (Calhoun 1983). Traditional standpoint theory works from the recognition that traditional practices have been devalued and often ignored as the detritus of progress, the past of modernity, the justifiable victim of dominant knowledge claims. This approach works from and with the lives of traditional musicians, through ethnography, analysis, and participant observation to come to a less distorted and less partial articulation of the transmission system in which they place themselves, and in which I place myself. The exclusion of traditional culture from dominant, canonical, representational schemes within Western culture (see, for example, Bohlman 1991; Bohlman 1992) allows us to view traditional articulation as a fresh perspective, the source of new critical analyses. <sup>1</sup>

Intellectual property, spectacle, commercialism, technology, and academia can all contribute to mapping of the traditional transmission processes through the claims that people make on their behalf to dominant authority. Each in turn can serve to nourish and reinforce dichotomies of tradition-modernity (see, for example, Fabian 1983), tradition-progress (see, for example, Bronk 1999), tradition-innovation (see, for example, Woodward 1980), public-private (see, for example, Blomley 1994; Habermas 1991), professional-amateur (see, for example, Finnegan 1989), gift-commodity (see, for example, Gregory 1982), oral-literate (see, for example, Leed 1980) in ways which claim the prerogative to enframe and interpret. I am concerned that my own work in academia may also be a misrepresentative mapping [Barnes, 1992 #744; O Cadhla, 1999 #711] of a cultural commons that will further undermine

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This concern with representation echoes much work in areas of anthropology and ethnography as people come to terms with the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the rough dichotomies of emic and etic perspectives, of insider and outsider worldviews. This concern with representation has found many allies within development studies as communities articulate their needs and their cultures to and for themselves, as they have always done, instead of first relying on the patriarchal and often askewed cartography and conceptual mapping of outside impositions.

and enclose traditional transmission processes and the practices and lives of people I care about. I proceed in the assumption that an absence of articulation, an absence of a political imperative in traditional music scholarship, will leave transmission processes, and the practices of the people at their centre, open to the effects of larger, socially influential vectors which are in no way benign. Nicholas Blomley, a cultural geographer, has written of mapping processes,

While claiming individual authority, the map also abstracts from the world it represents. The heterogeneity of local practice and the diversity of forms of representation are effaced, and rendered in abstract and symbolic form. In combination, the effect is an ever increasing reification of space. Space is no longer mapped from within the places from which it is understood, but (apparently) from without. ... As opposed to a *re-presentation* of space, the maps of modernity claim to offer its *presentation*. This objectification is a move, I think, of signal importance, entailing a modernist conception of space as something to be measured, contained, divided, manipulated, and -crucially - alienated. (1994:90)

The more successfully traditional musicians and singers do what traditional musicians and singers do, the more invisible, the less-mapped, they become, the less relevant then is their existence to the dominant, commercial, economic, institutionalised modes in western culture. This is one of the reasons that traditional culture is often portrayed as unconscious, nearer to the 'natural state of man,' instinctual (Leed 1980). Traditional music transmission has been largely unarticulated as a result of its very success. The praxis of everyday life for the most part has needed no scribes. By praxis here I mean socially-motivated, socially-embodied everyday thought-in-action. Many practices within transmission processes in Irish traditional music happen within the *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1984), that realm of the taken-forgranted, that has led people in the past to interpret traditional culture or 'folklore' as being pre-rational, primitive, and proto-human. Lack of articulation and silence is often equated with the assumption that people have nothing to say. Absence of evidence is not, however,

necessarily evidence of absence. Traditional culture is not without its own discourse (Keegan 1992), as I have found in talking to people. Traditional transmission still constitutes a commons in the sense that this is the system of a community which is under threat of enclosure, not so much physical enclosure, but the enclosure of one way of being, doing, and acting by another - of one epistemology by another - almost without notice (see, for example, Gudeman 1996). By viewing traditional transmission as a cultural commons we highlight the need for protection, we can identify what it is that needs protecting, and hopefully we can do something to counteract the impending crisis. Traditional culture's discourse also has its vectors, and it is these that I am attempting to identify in my research as I come to an understanding of traditional transmission as a cultural commons.

Coupled with this attempt to rearticulate traditional transmission as a system and a discourse I have found that the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault (vastly overused in academia, I must admit), has been useful, particularly his work on discipline, surveillance, and technologies of the self (Foucault 1991). I have also turned to the work of philosopher Alasdair McIntyre and his neo-aristotelian study of virtue and tradition (McIntyre 1981), in an attempt to find correlates for the system I have found in Irish traditional music and song. Also important has been the work of symbolic, social, and interpretive interactionists, such as Mead, Goffman, and Denzin (see, for example, Denzin 1989; Goffman 1967; Goffman 1997; Mead 1962; Plummer 1991), the wider field of the Sociology of Knowledge (see, for example, Mannheim 1936; McCarthy 1996), and work on trust within the field of Critical Management Studies (see, for example, Bigley and Pearce 1998; Das and Teng 1998; Elangovan and Shapiro 1998; Jones and George 1998; Lewicki, et al. 1998; Rousseau, et al. 1998; Whitener, et al. 1998). An emphasis on traditional transmission as praxis, as the practice of everyday life, has led me to examine the works of Lukács, Lefebvre, Bourdieu,

and others (Bourdieu 1977; Lefebvre 1984; Lukács 1971). A consciousness of systems has led me to examine the work of structuralists and post-structuralists (see, for example, Geertz 1973; Lechte 1994; Lévi-Strauss 1963; McCarthy 1996). In each case I have tried to use theory that supports what I have already found as practice within Irish traditional music and song, either through ethnography, participant observation, or research in studies that have already been done in my field. I have been careful at every stage to minimise the damage I inflict through misrepresentative interpretation.

What I intend to propose in my research is that traditional transmission, the cultural commons, is essentially an ethical system, bound within the always-already social. In simple terms, traditional culture as practised in the year 2000 in Ireland, and in Irish communities across the world, is a good thing to do, a good way to live, a political and ethical system unto itself. Through transmission, music, song, dance and story serve as objective correlatives for a value system, aesthetic carriers of a way of life. It all works within a social unity of past, present, and future time, where people are accountable to those with whom they interact, to those that have gone before, and to those that are yet to come. Traditional music practices are focused on the doing-of-the-doing, and take place within a system of praxis in much the way that Alasdair McIntyre has outlined 'tradition' in *After Virtue*. Here is a system which is always-already social, in which every action of an individual has social import, social significance, and social provenance. Identity is formed through interaction with others and in negotiation of self through craft and expressive activity.

The system of transmission as practised in Irish traditional music is governed by a least necessary condition for transmission (I have been joined friend and colleague John Moulden in the quest for this least necessary condition). This condition seems to be offering or giving,

the central, necessary ethical *telos* that is required for the system to remain one of unconditional trust, responsibility, and respect. *Telos* is for me here a question of a constant and often unacknowledged presence or impulse, which is realised through relationships. Unconditional trust that this principle of giving or offering will be maintained within this system presents optimum conditions for the flow of knowledge and the maintenance of traditional praxis.

Aristotle takes the *telos* of human life to be *a certain kind of life*; the *telos* is not something to be achieved at some future point, but in the way our whole life is constructed (McIntyre 1981:175).

This *telos* is nothing fancy. It's a basic attitude towards people and, in the case of my studies, towards people in and through music and song. It is conveyed by the following extract from an interview I conducted with an Uilleann Piper in Philadelphia in 1998,

I think if you're aware of the music you have to be humble in front of it. It's so much larger ... it's a continuum. There were literally people who gave their lives to keep the culture and the music alive. You have to remember that, and people in my life who have been nothing but welcoming to me and welcomed me into their homes and their lives and giving freely of everything that they have musically, Pete Ward, Kevin McGillian, Mick Moloney, anybody. You have to be humble in front of that or you're an egomaniac, you don't understand completely what a continuum is. ... It's not a religion, but it's extremely spiritual, and I sometimes am very conscious of being part of a river, or an ocean, or just a body, and trying to tap into that as a source to make the music richer, to do justice to it and to use that as the foundation any time I try to help somebody who would come along with the music. I always tell them that people always helped me out without asking for anything in return, especially with uilleann piping. There's so much stuff that you can get stuck on. Reeds, and all that jazz. And everybody in the Irish piping community has been forthcoming in every way, to try and give you everything that they know over the years and they talk about the person that helped them. Everybody's standing on everybody else's shoulders. ... The music doesn't belong to anybody, so if somebody's trying to learn it and you can help them, it's not yours, so it's not like you can hold back because it's not yours anyway. There have been people who have come to the sessions who have been rude, and I've had differences with them. But if somebody is sincere and it seems like they're trying to tap into the spirit of the music then you have to stretch your hand out to them. Why wouldn't you? (Roy Rodgers, Uilleann Piper, Personal Interview, Philadelphia, 1998)

This *telos* is the principle that cradles the composition of tunes or songs which are then offered up to the *possibility* of anonymity as they are passed on from person to person. I write a song. I sing it. Someone else asks me for it. They sing it, their way. Later someone else asks them for it. They pass it on. The next person sings it their way. A leading musician and composer in the traditional idiom has commented that she gets a kick out of hearing one of her tunes played at an Irish traditional 'session' (a complex phenomenon, but for the most part an informal gathering of musicians) where no-one knows who wrote it (Personal Interview 1996). Transmission. Continuity of transmission concurrent with variables of person and personality, form, place, space, race, and time. The *telos* of offering/giving seems to be the only thing that remains as a constant over time, the only thing that maintains this as a cultural commons. (This is not to say, however that it remains free of the threat of enclosure. I deal with this issue in my forthcoming thesis.)

Anonymity becomes crucial in this formation. Anonymity, in folk music scholarship, was often in the past seen to be indicative of a collective folk consciousness, 'the product of the folk' in contrast to creative individuality (see, for example, Price 1989). Anonymity in this formulation was deemed synonymous with 'traditional', which, in terms of coyright and its related discourse, becomes quickly translated to anonymity as 'public domain.' Art historian and anthropologist Annette Weiner has described folklore (which I here use as synonymous with traditional culture, while recognising difficulties that many, including myself, have with the term), as

... indeed a living, changing tradition that finds its base in the community, with important elements consisting of: tradition - a heritage, that has been passed down through the generations; anonymity - the premise that folklore is the work of one or more anonymous authors; and belonging to a specific community, which has absorbed the work into its culture and everyday life, thus rendering it anonymous (1987:59).

It is my suggestion that anonymity is absolutely central to our understanding of the *telos* and the cultural commons, acting as a window onto this system which is otherwise illegible, unless you engage as an actor within its frame of relationships. The eventual anonymity, arguably itself a construction of naming or authorship, is not an absence but a presence, not the lack of a name, but the lack of a claim, the presence of an offering, the heart of the cultural commons.

Within this system of unconditional trust, responsibility, and respect, upheld by the central continous vector of offering or giving, we have many supporting vectors: community; participation; accessibility; apprenticeship; craft as identity formation; space and place; personal impulse; collective discursive memory; orality; and traditional aesthetics, among others. Here authority is implicit, offered by others (age, skill, personality, craft etc.), not explicit, claimed by oneself (institutional status, public relations, or self-promotion). Held together by the central principle, this is a system which can admit many variables (Recent years have seen the successful introduction of the Greek bouzouki, or at least variants thereof, as an Irish traditional instrument). Other than the central principle no other vector is essential within any short term period within the system, although each overlaps and reinforces the others in ways I have yet to examine.

Working with an overarching *telos* or a central guiding principle within transmission draws the attention away from the 'thing' or the individual 'event'. Things or events no longer make sense unless contextualised within the wider framework of transmission. Isolating a 'tune' or a 'song' becomes obviously arbitrary and socially situated, more indicative of an interpersonally located 'complex of variables' than the autonomous aesthetic object that the

'musical work' or 'tune' would suggest. Suddenly 'reciprocation' as a singular, isolated event is of little analytical use unless it can be framed within the wider principle of the *offering/giving*. Within the *telos* reciprocity need not occur at all times as a constant. All that is required within the system of transmission is that the offering or giving remains as a *predominant* vector, when assessed over time.

What I am proposing, at least within the context of Irish traditional culture, is that we seek to understand intergenerational, 'traditional' tranmission as a commons, that we seek to reappraise the commons as an ethical system, that in approaching transmission systems as a commons we can use methods which do not undermine the necessity to avoid over-reification and hence over-simplification within the playgrounds of positivism. In this formulation the question of enclosure becomes a function of claim-rights, of explicit authority, of the bypassing and transplantation of implicit, traditional hierarchies and standards with explicit, externally imposed ones. This recognition of traditional transmission as a commons-based system will add to its coeval revalidation as one among many cultural practices. The cultural commons is about people, about ways that people have of forming relationships, about ways that people deal with each other, ways they treat each other. The cultural commons is the stuff of life in traditional transmission.

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