

Jon Wilson, 17 March 2008

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Thoughts on Tradition

In these opening comments, I will ask whether the impetus that led to this workshop might be positioned between two contradictory tendencies in contemporary, global political and academic discourse. These comments are rapidly produced thoughts – meant as a jumping off point and possible starting point for critique; they don't offer any systematic attempt at thought on 'tradition'. With that in mind, I'd like to begin with an anecdote, heard in a programme on multiculturalism on BBC Radio 4 some months ago. A Bangladeshi boy from Birmingham was asked about his own culture, and talked in particular about what it meant for him to be a Muslim. He compared his own sense of the richness of religion and culture with what he saw as the amoral and meaningless life of white working class west midlanders. 'They get up, go to work, eat fish and chips, go to the pub, go to sleep – what kind of tradition is that'.

As this anecdote indicates, "tradition" is an important concept within our present global moment, yet it is unevenly significant. Like history and culture, tradition is something that everyone is supposed to have or to belong to – but some people are called to account for it in a way that others are not. Everyday life as a member of a so-called 'minority' community in many modern states, Britain included, involves instances of being called to account for one's 'tradition'. The fact that the British-Bangladeshi boy mentioned a

moment ago is used being interrogated about his 'cultural tradition' is a sign of his minority status. The assumption is that such traditions are relatively unchanging through time, but can be located within specific locations in space. They are also often seen to have the potential to clash with 'modern' ways of doing things: although that is not essential to their being recognised as traditions. By contrast, to ask the majority pub-going fish-and-chips eating population to account for *their* traditions, as the British-Bangladeshi boy mentioned above did seems absurd. That isn't because the practices of the majority are universal or more modern, although they are often seen as such; it is simply because they are practices that are defined as majority or dominant, and so can be taken for granted as just what-one-ordinarily-does. In many environments, to begin to describe a taken-for-granted set of practices as a tradition is to do something quite strange.

The distinction I'm talking about here might be mapped onto Martin Heidegger's distinction between treating things as ready-to-hand and present-at-hand: between the subject's practical immersion in the world of actions and objects in an unself-conscious way on the one hand, and the abstract thoughts one develops after stepping back and adopting the posture of an observer on the other. This distinction maps on to a theme which is central to thinking about tradition: the relationship between tradition as unthought practice or *habitus*, and tradition as a highly self-reflective, objective form of thought; or between etic and emic accounts of traditional practice. The question I'd like to ask here is: whether there has been an increasing tendency towards the explicit recognition of taken-for-granted thoughts or practices as traditions: have previously take-

for-granted forms of traditional practice become objectivised and present-at-hand, the subject of abstract thought even by its practitioners; and if so, what are the circumstances in which such a change of register occurs.

I noted a moment ago that populations defined as 'minorities' are scrutinised and forced to account for their 'traditions' in this abstract way. But perhaps such a strange posture towards tradition has become increasingly normal in many parts of the world. In many colonial and post-colonial contexts, highly self-conscious, secular or religious 'traditions' provide a central aspect of the way national belonging is articulated and thought about for example. Over the last twenty or thirty years, many of the universalistic redemptive narratives which drove anti-colonial nationalism have faded, and the story of the third world nation-state can be told, as David Scott has recently noted, as a tragic narrative. In the process the third world nation-state's claim to sovereignty has often reduced to a claim about the protection of culture or tradition of one kind or another. For example: the independence of Bangladesh within Pakistan in 1947 and then from Pakistan in 1971 was celebrated at the time in a series of an almost utopian narratives about the economic effects of political emancipation or extension of global human rights. But since 1971, the different varieties of Bangladeshi nationalism have emphasised the need for state sovereignty to protect indigenous traditions from outside interference, whether they are the secular, religiously plural Bengali traditions celebrated by the left or Islam-based military backed politics of the right.

In these various contexts, the invocation of 'tradition' takes place in a process where the power of universal political or ethical categories are seen to have been undermined. But the return of tradition as a category within the academy has been part of this move, in a variety of different way. In the 1970s political theorists such as Nozick and Rawls confidently claimed universality for liberal political thought. But throughout the 1980s these claims were whittled away by so-called 'communitarian' critics such as Alastair Macintyre who argued that the foundations for effective ethical judgement always rely on particular moral traditions. By the 1990s even Rawls had begun to claim that liberalism was just one tradition amongst many.

Moving quickly to history: in the early 1980s, confident modernists such as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger could be rather condescending about the way many modernising regimes engage in the *Invention of Tradition*; the implication was that sufficiently radical political leaders wielding universalistic concepts of progress and social justice would have no truck with moves of this kind. But, the authors of the recent volume *Tradition in Question* suggest that such an approach does not do justice to the very real ways in which un-invented traditions occur in the world. Again the invocation of tradition occurs to fragment a previously unified field of knowledge; it also works to spatialise knowledge, map particular currents of thought onto geographically bounded, imagined or real territories.

In these various different environments, the resurgent idea of 'tradition' is used to articulate a sense of the world's spatial pluralism, but also to convey the sense in which

different cultural or intellectual systems: different 'traditions' are coherent and, often, self-sufficient. For Alasdair Macintyre, for example, a tradition is defined as a set of practices that sets its own goals that can only be understood internally, from within the tradition. For Macintyre, moral debate does not occur through the assessment of propositions enunciated from within a tradition by others outside. There is no place outside the practices of one tradition or another from which such evaluation might take place. Instead, rational moral or political debate involves a process where different parties test the extent to which the traditions they speak from within are internally consistent; or whether by contrast 'they fail on its own terms and by its own standards'.

Macintyre's view of humans as beings in need of tradition overlaps with his sense that 'man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal'. As Macintyre puts it 'we enter upon a stage which we do not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not our making'. Embedded in the practical and social contexts we are thrown into, we nonetheless try to construct and enact dramatic narratives, telling coherent stories about our selves in which the role we have assigned to us our realised. These stories rely upon the particular social and traditionary contexts we are embedded within; indeed the coherent story we tell about being responsible agents in the world only makes sense if we belong to a specific group that has a particular past, and are bearers of a particular tradition. As Macintyre puts it, 'the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualistic mode, is to deform my present relationships'.

Macintyre's emphasis on narrative is part of the pluralizing tendency I've noted: the tendency to reduce categories and concepts which were once supposed to have universalistic applicability to being merely one set of narratives specific to a particular community in a specific place. Yet, Macintyre, like others who defend this turn towards tradition, are liable to fall prey to a second tendency and set of questions within political and academic discourse: the tendency which denies that stable traditions can exist to begin with. This tendency might be seen within a number of processes; I'd like to chart three.

Firstly, I suggested a moment ago that the modern mapping of diversity onto tradition seemed to spatialise it. Tradition is often identified as something specific to a particular place. Yet, contemporary social science describes the de-spatialisation of everyday life, through the globalisation of media and branding, increase in migration or role of virtual internet communities for which geography is irrelevant. Of course, these processes often lead to the intensification of 'traditional' forms of identity – the internet allows diasporic communities to communicate better. But the idea of tradition that people like Macintyre at least articulate relies on shared embodied forms of practice occurring in a particular place. By contrast, the identities articulated on the net seem perhaps to be strange globalised simulacra of 'real' forms of identity.

Secondly, in so far as – according to Macintyre – tradition relies on the construction of stable narratives where the self articulates their relationship to history: but the very

possibility of such stable narratives is called into question across a range of media and within a number of different disciplines of thought, from psychology to history to art. I don't have time to consider the range of anti- or non-narrativist intellectual moves made in the last few years. I'd just like to briefly mention two. First of all, the paintings of the Canadian artist Peter Doig, currently on display at Tate Britain. Doig's paintings are anecdotal, depicting situations, yet Doig explicitly resists any attempt to place those situations in a particular narrative context, or for that matter within a particular artistic tradition. Secondly, some recent arguments made by the philosopher Galen Strawson. Strawson argues against MacIntyre that human beings can live without attempting to subordinate their life to narrative. For Strawson, the attempt to plot action onto a holistic narrative that connects to a wider traditional context is something only particular rather than abstract and academically-minded people do – people like MacIntyre for example. But a morally good and fully realised human life is possible without it.

Finally, and connected to this, is the force of the kinds of genealogical approach which Foucault advocated as a tool of analysis. This approach would suggest that any attempt to find stable meaning or identity on 'tradition' is only ever the exercise of a will to power. It is not based on any historically continuous form of practice, but merely represents the attempt by power to paper over the ruptures and discontinuities of the past with an illusion of continuity. Maleiha will discuss these kinds of arguments in a moment, considering how one distinguishes tradition from ideology. Philosophers such as MacIntyre have their defence against this kind of argument: for MacIntyre, the genealogical move still relies upon a critiquing self who has a stable identity themselves,

even if they impute instability to all around them. But all this seems to do is subject the genealogist to the kind of critique she submits others to, not rescue 'tradition' from attack.

These various disaggregating, fragmenting moves seem to make 'tradition' impossible as a category of either academic analysis or everyday life. But they do so at a moment precisely when the justification of existence, identity or argument in terms of tradition is required in more and more environments: ranging from the life of 'minority' Britain to the career of post-analytical liberal political theory. The thought I'd like to open with is the extent to which 'tradition' seems both necessary and impossible; why this is so; and whether the very same forces that force some of us to account for our 'tradition' also make it such a difficult concept to think about.

- How does one identify a 'tradition'? How do different disciplines, intellectual practices and bureaucratic procedures go about doing so?
- What kinds of relationship with the past do different concepts of 'tradition' involve?
- Is there a single, characteristically 'modern' form of 'tradition', different from the traditions that occurred in the non-modern world? How and when did this modern idea of tradition emerge?
- What has the relationship between rationality and tradition been? Does rationality offer an external perspective capable of critiquing tradition, or are there traditions of rationalism? How is the translation of rationalist political thought or bureaucratic norms into social practice experienced by the citizens themselves? Is rationalism experienced as simply one, sometimes conflicting, tradition amongst many? What implications does this have for the authority of contemporary political/legal institutions and civil society?
- What is the difference between a tradition and a 'culture' and an intellectual 'discipline'.
- How do traditions change?
- What is it about our current, global intellectual and cultural moment that makes 'tradition' such an important concept? What are the political and institutional uses to which the notion of tradition is put? How have the meanings and use of tradition changed in the post-September 11 world?