

Tradition in the Present. Initial research questions

Despite their different emphases, scholars within the network share a common perspective. Rather than seeing traditions as objective structures that determine human action from the outside, they are concerned with the way tradition is experienced by subjects within the practical worlds they inhabit. Using this approach participants seek to address the following questions.

First, the network is interested in thinking about how one identifies a 'tradition'? What is it about particular kinds of religious, political or intellectual practices that makes them traditions? Why, over the last fifty years, have certain 'minority' groups in British and North American society begun to experience themselves as belonging to religious and cultural traditions in ways that 'majority' populations often do not?

Second, what is the relationship between rationality and tradition? Superficially, rationalism is opposed to tradition. Yet, might not rationality and reason, in their various different forms themselves rely upon assumptions and practices that are inherited from the past in a 'traditional' fashion? Are academic disciplines 'traditions' themselves? If so, how do they present themselves as 'neutral' rather than one among a number of viable intellectual traditions?

Third, our project looks at the way different concepts of tradition relate to the past. Some ideas about 'tradition' emphasize the importance of change and development, John Henry Newman's for example. Others are experienced as a rigid conformity to rigid rules inherited from the past. Tradition in the Present asks about the conditions that allow one conception of 'tradition' to dominate? Is there a particularly 'modern' way of thinking about tradition, associated with forms of technology, bureaucracy or economics that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century for example?

These theoretical and historical issues raise practical questions about the relationship between historical research and the world we live in today. In public, politicians and officials believe they possess a neutral language to classify and discuss different ethnic and religious 'traditions'. How has the translation of rationalist political thought or bureaucratic norms into social practice been experienced by citizens themselves? Where these citizens are differentiated into diverse social groups, is rationalism experienced as simply one tradition amongst many?

Finally, we consider how traditions are criticised and transformed. What are the forms in which participants within 'traditions' alter their direction or self-understanding? Often, criticism that begins as a critique internal to a tradition ends up being seen as coming from outside by the critics enemies. How, and why, can some kinds of criticism - feminist Islam, or deconstructionist philosophy

for example - be so easily undermined with the claim that they have gone beyond the limits of the tradition they inhabit.

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Some thoughts: Two concepts of tradition

The word tradition is often used in one of two contradictory ways.

1. For Alasdair Macintyre, tradition involves the production of ends within a set of practices, which don't make sense without a habitual immersion in particular ways of life. 'Reason' consists of a series of skills and practical techniques, not a form of knowledge able to scrutinise and critique from a distance. Tradition involves continual manouvring, continual change, but that change occurs in order to preserve the continuities of the past in response to new circumstances. This kind of tradition is uncodifiable – its participants may be explicit about their existence in a tradition, but cannot be explicit about every form of practice and skill they engage in to sustain it.

2. Alternatively, tradition is something which existed continuously in the past, but which is disconnected from the present by a break or rupture of some kind. The agent exists outside this tradition – s/he can either supercede it by acting to create a different, modern future, or look back in order to appropriate seemingly static elements of tradition from the past. Either way, tradition is something that is manipulated and wielded for instrumental ends that are not created by the tradition. One can even speak of *The Invention of Tradition*, by individuals who are not immersed within it

Yet, all forms of knowledge and critique involve some degree of tradition in the first sense – the continuities of the past inform actions in the present in a way agents are not entirely conscious of. 'Reason' and 'Modernity' have their traditions; post-Kantian philosophy requires particular learnt styles of thought that involve the reproduction of a tradition, even though the explicit arguments it produces claims that reason is capable of offer critique by itself. The *Invention of Tradition* has its own traditionary practices, inherited by the present from the past.

But, it is difficult for we moderns to speak of tradition without evoking the second, ironic and detached sense of what tradition is: of tradition as a static form of continuity which existed in the past, but which has been disconnected from the present. Tradition is either something that is nostalgically celebrated and whose demise is tragically lamented – often, in such Tory rhetorics, not without a touch of irony. Or, for self-conscious progressives, it something whose defeat is happily glorified, whilst its last traces eviscerated from our world. Each of these positions seems to suggest that when we explicitly discuss tradition in a political or academic mode we feel separated from it by rupture and loss – even though we happily recognise the existence of traditionary practices in our everyday lives.

Questions

Why is this? Is it because academic and political discourse is built on a tradition of verbal anti-traditionalism, a tradition of being uncomfortable with anything that might be recognised as such? If that is the case, how can the contradictions it places us within be overcome?

How is it possible to offer an ethical critique of a 'tradition' without adopting a snooty position of ironic detachment towards it?

Tradition and secularism. Is the difference between these two concepts of tradition between a secular and non-secular sense of what tradition is? Secularism, after all, involves a cluster of beliefs about the power of the reasoning subject to develop forms of critique outside a traditional framework, and the idea that human beings stand on a homogenous temporal field able to make their own history. If this is so, (a) secularism is necessarily rooted in non-secular forms of implicit traditional practice and (b) the antithesis of the secular is not the religious, as there are many forms of Tradition which do not involve religion – e.g. the common law.

Jon Wilson, March 2008