Invention or transformation?  
Tradition in the contemporary world.

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Abstract:

Interest in the fate of tradition in modernity has emerged as a central concern in recent social theory. Prominent analyses have pointed to contemporary processes of detraditionalisation, and in some cases retraditionalisation, particularly in the realm of personal relationships, and of ‘the invention of tradition’, especially in connection with nationalist and ethnic movements. The ongoing presence and influence of tradition in modernity is also a central theme within the emerging paradigm of ‘multiple modernities’. For this increasingly influential perspective, however, the significance accorded to the presence of tradition in modernity has a markedly different basis. The traditions it is concerned with are those which define civilisations, and its central claim is that diverse civilisational traditions shape modern constellations and co-constitute multiple forms of modernity. In this paper, I suggest that the multiple modernities perspective’s broader frame of reference and distinctive conceptual framework provide important background to all debates around the operation of tradition in modernity. In the limited space available, I make this case in relation to the idea of the invention of tradition. An analysis of the underlying premises of the two approaches suggests that the multiple modernities perspective can shed new light the phenomena referred to as the invention of tradition, and bring to the fore aspects of the influence of tradition that it tends to obscure.

Keywords: tradition, invention, multiple modernities, Hobsbawm

Introduction

The fate of ‘tradition’ in the modern world has been an unexpectedly persistent issue in sociological analyses of contemporary social life. Seemingly sidelined by classical modernisation theory, ‘where modern society’ was defined as a break with tradition, interest in the nature and role of tradition in modernity has returned as a central concern in a number of influential analyses. While ultimately also tracing its decline, the thesis of ‘detraditionalisation’ accords tradition a not yet exhausted presence in modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Tradition has also re-entered key debates with the notion of the ‘invention of tradition’, coined by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm and widely adopted in sociological analyses of nationalism and ethnic movements. Hobsbawm argues, in explicit opposition to modernisation theory, that traditions are not confined to ‘traditional’ societies, but also have their place in modern ones. As he sees it, the most important feature of traditionality in modernity is the deliberate creation of traditions in the service of new social and political powers. The social dislocation associated with the emergence of modernity created a situation in which the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed were weakened, and new – most
importantly nationalist – traditions were consciously created by emerging social powers to fill the void (Hobsbawm 1992: 4-5).

The presence and influence of tradition in modernity is also a central theme in the emerging paradigm of ‘multiple modernities’. This increasingly influential approach is also explicitly opposed to classical modernisation theory’s view of modernity as a break with tradition, but the significance it accords to its persistence has a markedly different basis to that suggested by Hobsbawm. The traditions it is most centrally concerned with are those which define – and differentiate – civilisations. It argues, against the idea that modernity is a culture-neutral, ‘universal’ social constellation, that diverse civilisational traditions shape modern constellations and co-constitute multiple forms of modernity.

These divergent evaluations of the character and role of traditions in the modern world stem in part from their divergent usages of the term; the particular phenomena that are the focus of each perspective differ in some important respects. This opens up the possibility that the seemingly contradictory conclusions about the role of tradition in modern societies may be reconciled. Such reconciliation would, however, require a framework comprehensive enough to account for the range of phenomena covered by the three perspectives. It is my contention that the multiple modernities perspective is best placed to do this. In the limited space available here, I attempt to make this case in relation to the idea of the invention of tradition. To begin, I sketch the main claims of the two perspectives about traditions in the modern world, and clarify the particular phenomena with which each is concerned. I then explore the conception of tradition which underlies each line of argument. On the basis of this comparative analysis, I argue that the multiple modernities perspective can account for the ‘invention of traditions’ by relativising some its claims, while exclusive emphasis on the idea of the invention of tradition tends to obscure the more fundamental influence of traditions on modern forms of social life.

**Claims and clarifications**

Hobsbawm’s interest is not traditions in general, but the subcategory of traditions which are invented’. Invented traditions are sets of practices governed by rules of a symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate values and norms of behaviour by repetition (Hobsbawm 1992: 1), and for Hobsbawm, their most significant characteristics are their recent and conscious construction, and their factitious reference to the past. Despite their claims to long historical precedent, the invented traditions Hobsbawm is concerned with are modern developments, and far from being linked organically to inherited ‘ways of doing things’, they ‘rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative’. While the invention of traditions is probably ubiquitous, his main interest is in the proliferation of invented traditions in the period of rapid social transformation occasioned by the advent of modernity, and in particular with those associated with the emergence of the nation and nationalism. It is in relation to debates around nationalism that the thesis of the invention of tradition has its primary application. In this context, he argues that invented traditions were pivotal in the emergence of nations and nationalism in the early modern era, and continue to characterise many nationalist and ethnic movements. The national phenomenon therefore ‘cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 14), and in the debate between
primordialists and modernists, he insists that nationalist traditions are strictly modern phenomenon (Babadzan 2000: 134).

Where Hobsbawm is concerned centrally with the sub category of traditions which are invented in modernity, the multiple modernities perspective’s main theme is the influence of the traditions of diverse civilisations on modern social constellations. And where Hobsbawm’s thesis addressed debates over nationalism, the multiple modernities perspective addressed a series of theoretical issues encountered in social theory in general, and modernisation theory in particular, in the 1970s. Elaborated within the framework of ‘civilisational analysis’ associated with Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000; 2002) and Johann Arnason (2002; 2003), the perspective’s emphasis on the enduring influence of traditions in modernity emerged as part the ‘cultural turn’ which sought to rectify a longstanding neglect of the role of meaning in social life, and set itself in explicit opposition to functionalist assumptions which left little room for cultural creativity, as well as its unilinear and evolutionist conception of modernisation as a universal process with a single outcome. (Arnason 2007: 5). Breaking with definitions couched exclusively in terms of structural differentiation, it accorded a central place to cultural orientations in the constitution of modernity. Its analyses of western modernity - both the first and to date most globally influential model - identified the key development in this regard as the emergence of new conceptions of human autonomy and agency, and underlined the bifurcation of these novel cultural orientations into conceptions of ‘rational mastery’ on the one hand, and expressivity and self-questioning on the other. The perspective also argues that these cultural orientations structure the institutional spheres which become differentiated in modernity.

‘Traditions’ figure in this framework in fundamental ways. The cultural orientations which animate modernity are understood as embedded in specific, concrete traditions, most notably in those associates with the Enlightenment and Romanticism. And both the broad orientations and their more concrete embodiments are seen as rooted in traditions with deep roots in the premodern world. Modern conceptions of human autonomy are seen as a radicalisation of cultural premises first introduced by the then novel and historically highly consequential distinction between transcendental and mundane worlds in the Axial period (Eisenstadt, 2002: 7). At the same time, diverse civilisational traditions exert a formative influence on modern social configurations; western traditions are a component of all forms of modernity, but their influence around the globe has been conditioned in significant ways by their interactions with other civilisational legacies.

Underlying premises

Underlying these different interests in tradition are divergent sets of assumptions about what traditions are. For both approaches, traditions are practices with symbolic import which have long histories and variable degrees of influence in different societies, but beyond this shared starting point, three important differences can be discerned.

An initial difference is found in the greater differentiation of the multiple modernities concept. For Hobsbawm, traditions are unified; they are discreet sets of practices with specific symbolic functions, which are for the most part mobilised in delimited domains. The multiple modernities
perspective, in contrast, from the outset distinguishes two dimensions of tradition, evident in Eisenstadt’s early definition of tradition as

the routinised symbolisation of the models of social order and of the constellation of the codes, the guidelines, which delineate the limits of the binding cultural order, of membership in it, and of its boundaries, which prescribe the ‘proper’ choices of goals and patterns of behaviour; it can also be seen as the modes of evaluation as well as of the sanctioning and legitimation of the ‘totality’ of the cultural and social order, or of any of its parts’ (Eisenstadt, 1973: 139).

This distinction between the two components is highly consequential, as it allows the multiple modernities perspective to differentiate between the use of traditions for the legitimation of social and cultural orders and the role traditions play in shaping the fundamental cultural orientations of social configurations. As Eisenstadt points out, from this point of view, what is usually taken to be the essence of ‘traditionality’ - the upholding of criteria of sacredness, pastness and origin - is only one component of tradition (Eisenstadt 1973: 139).

A second difference concerns the relative weight and conceptual ordering of the symbolic and practical components: for Hobsbawm, traditions are practices which have a ‘ritual or symbolic function’ (1992: 3), while for the multiple modernities perspective they are, in Eisenstadt’s terms, ‘routinised symbolisations’. Underlying this reversal in emphasis, however, is a distinctive understanding of culture and its role in the patterning of social life, and a brief account of it will help to clarify the multiple modernities perspective’s understanding of tradition.

The key here is a hermeneutical approach to the patterns of meaning which orient social life, made most explicit by Arnason, that leads to an understanding of formative cultural orientations themselves as ‘traditions’, conceived as loosely defined patterns of meaning open to routinisation in multiple and diverse practices. Crucially, Arnason’s deployment of hermeneutical themes stresses not only the formative influence of cultural frameworks, but also their plasticity. He draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of ‘effective history’ to argue that cultural orientations are embedded in, and partly constitutive of, social practices and institutions, but equally that they are always open to ongoing reinterpretation in new historical circumstances (Arnason 2002: 151). At the same time, he takes up a second hermeneutical theme to underline the malleability of cultural orientations; in this case, he adopts Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the ‘conflict of interpretations’ to stress the inbuilt multivocity of all symbolic patterns, and to highlight their permanent openness not only to new, but also conflicting interpretations.

The hermeneutical cast of the multiple modernities framework also comes into play in relation to a third difference between the two approaches, which concerns the historical plasticity of traditions in particular. On this point there are a number of ambiguities in Hobsbawm’s conceptualisation. On the one hand, Hobsbawm’s traditions are by definition characterised by rigidity; ‘the object and characteristic of traditions is invariance’ (Hobsbawm 1992: 2). He underlines this point by contrasting traditions with ‘custom’. Customs, which are dominant in traditional societies, are both stable and malleable; they do not preclude innovation, but give desired change the sanction of precedent. When he is distinguishing non-invented traditions from
invented ones, however, he underlines the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions (1992: 8), as well as their organic continuity with the past, that stands in contrast to the factitious continuity with the past characteristic of invented traditions (1992: 2). As even his defenders have argued, Hobsbawm’s dichotomising framework of genuine and invented traditions does not do justice to the spectrum of traditions and, importantly, obscures precisely those which most evidence plasticity; as Babadzan sees it, ‘adapted’ and ‘syncretic’ traditions are important ‘borderline’ cases that do not sit well in the dualistic frame (Babadzan: 141).

In contrast, the transformation of traditions is central to the multiple modernities perspective’s understanding of their enduring influence in modernity. Far from arguing that they persist unchanged, it stresses that modernity radically transforms traditions, without, however, eliminating them. What is at issue is continuity not of particular beliefs, values, norms or rituals, but rather of identifiable, albeit polymorphous, patterns of meaning operating across time.

While not explicitly drawing on the multiple modernities perspective, but as I have argued elsewhere (Ballantyne 2001; 2010) in line with its key premises, Alain Touraine’s *Critique of Modernity* offers a useful illustration of this understanding of tradition in modernity. He too sees modernity as characterised by a new sense of human agency which is interpreted both in terms of rational mastery, and expressivity and questioning; as he sees it, modernity is constituted by the tension between ‘rationalisation’ and ‘subjectivation’ understood as broad cultural orientations which are embodied in diverse social practices and processes. Most relevant here, he sees these cultural orientations as transformations of cultural premises built into the Christian worldview. In contrast to traditions which saw the world as at the mercy of favourable or unfavourable intentions or hidden forces, the Christian world was both created by a divine subject and organised in accordance with rational laws; in the breakup *this* world, occasioned by the upheavals of modernity, the idea of rational construction of the world was transformed into science, and the breaking of the link between the divine subject and human subject set free self-expression (Touraine 1995: 205).

**Conclusion**

The idea of multiple modernities has not yet gained exposure in Anglophone debates comparable to that of the idea of the invention of tradition. Yet even this preliminary analysis suggests that its broader concern with and more differentiated understanding of tradition provide an important context for the idea of invention, and suggest that without it, the emphasis on the invention of tradition has the potential to misconstrue its operation in modernity in several ways. Firstly, in focusing exclusively on what from the multiple modernities perspective is only one part of tradition, it runs the danger of deflecting attention from enduring, albeit shifting, aspects of tradition. This risk has been accentuated by the very success of the idea of invention of traditions; as Babadzan has noted, invoking the notion has become *de rigueur* in work addressing questions of ethnicity or cultural change, where virtually any ‘innovation-becoming-custom’ - even the wines of Bordeaux - qualifies as invented tradition.

Secondly, the idea of invention also in part misconstrues the particular processes it has been invoked to explain. From the multiple modernities perspective, the creation of ‘new’ traditions in
modernity would be better understood as a process of transformation. Eisenstadt, like Hobsbawm, sees the crystallisation of new traditions of the kind that are at the centre of Hobsbawm’s analysis as responses to problems created by the breakdown of traditional legitimation of sociopolitical and cultural orders (Eisenstadt 1973: 210). Importantly, however, he stresses that the processes which weakened one aspect of traditionality - the legitimation of the social, political and cultural orders - gave rise to a continuous process of reconstruction of other aspects of tradition (Eisenstadt 1973: 210). And importantly, reconstruction is not the same thing as invention. In this regard, Arnason has argued that the idea of the invention of tradition misses a crucial point by failing to recognise that while concrete contents maybe ‘invented’, the historical horizon of tradition as such is not (Arnason 2007: 23). His point is that while particular traditions may be invented, they are always created within particular cultural ‘worlds’ at specific historical points. These broader socio-cultural contexts provide the parameters of what is invented. Put another way, invented traditions are constructed from culturally and historically located components, and recognising the specificity and influence of these broader contexts is important.

Finally, from the point of view of multiple modernities, the modernist cast of the notion of the invention of traditions obscures the complexities of nationalism. By arguing that nationalism is of exclusively modern origin, it obscures the non-modern elements of the phenomenon. The multiple modernities perspective does not oppose the modernist thesis along exclusively ‘primordialist’ or ‘perennialist’ lines, but insists on both the modernity of nationalism and nations, and the origins of nations in pre-existing traditions and collective identities.

References


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