Beyond the dichotomy: Tradition in modernity

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Abstract

The paradigm of 'multiple modernities' associated with the civilisational theory of S N Eisenstadt and Johann Arnason has emerged as one of the most ambitious attempts to go beyond Eurocentric conceptions of modernity. Underpinning its project to 'multiply modernity' is a distinctive take on the 'cultural turn' that characterised late twentieth century social theory; in contrast to the idea that modernity is a universal, culture-neutral formation, it argues that diverse traditions (including those which demarcate civilisations) have played a formative role in the emergence of multiple forms of modernity.

However, this line of argument runs counter to some entrenched assumptions about the relationship between modernity and tradition. The idea that tradition is eroded in modernity was one of the most powerful legacies of classical social thought, and has been given a new lease of life in recent debates. In this paper, I contrast the multiple modernities understanding of the role of tradition in the modern world with the revival of classical assumptions evident in Anthony Giddens' notions of detraditionalisation and post-traditional society. I argue that Giddens ultimately perpetuates the dichotomising tendency evident in the classical conceptions of modernity as the 'opposite' or absence of tradition, while the multiple modernities approach opens up fertile conceptual means for grasping the interpenetration of tradition and modernity. I argue further that the two approaches' divergent assessments of the role of tradition in the contemporary world can be traced to their divergent understandings of what tradition is.

Keywords: tradition, detraditionalisation, multiple modernities, Giddens, Arnason
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Introduction

A rejection of Eurocentric and monolithic understandings of modernity has been a hallmark of much recent social theory. But while critiques of the homogenising and distorting aspects of earlier approaches have been common, constructive alternatives have been much rarer. One of the few, and certainly most ambitious, attempts to forge a new path can be found in the emerging paradigm of ‘multiple modernities’ associated with the civilisational theory of SN Eisenstadt (2000; 2002) and Johann Arnason (2003; 2007). Explicitly setting itself against conceptions of modernisation as a universal process with a single outcome, the perspective has made the formative influence of diverse civilisational legacies on modern social configurations one of its central themes. As the multiple modernities perspective sees it, the diverse cultural traditions and institutional frameworks which set civilisations apart from each other play a crucial role in shaping both paths to modernity and their outcomes. By broadening the perspective on modernity in this way, the paradigm provides a powerful substantive basis for moving beyond the widely discredited but rarely surpassed tendency to use the Western experience uncritically as the exclusive source of criteria for conceptualising modernity.

However, the idea that cultural and institutional traditions originating in the premodern world have a continuing presence in modern world runs counter some entrenched assumptions about modernity. As Thompson (1996: 89) points out, the idea that tradition is eroded and ultimately eliminated in modern societies is one of the most powerful legacies of classical sociological
thought. It is evident in twentieth century modernisation theory, which defined modernity as a break with tradition. And more recently, the idea that modernity corrodes tradition has been given a new lease of life in influential arguments, associated primarily with Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, about ‘detraditionalisation’ and ‘post-traditional society’ (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; 1994).

The conviction that traditions disappear in modernity has been accompanied, moreover, by a notable absence of close examination of the phenomena involved. For the most part, the idea of tradition has been simply invoked as an (unexamined) foil against which modernity is defined, and as a consequence, tradition has rarely been defined in positive terms - it is simply what is not rational, not individualistic, not autonomous, not modern.

In light of the continued resonance of the idea of the decline of tradition (see for example Heelas, Lash and Morris 1996), it seems pertinent to examine what is involved in the multiple modernities claims. In what follows, I first outline the pertinent features of the concepts of detraditionalization and post-traditional society. Against this background, I then consider the multiple modernities view of the relationship between tradition and modernity. I argue that underlying their divergent conclusions about the fate of tradition in the modern world are divergent understandings of what tradition is. To conclude, I examine in more detail the conception of tradition as it is being rethought within the perspective of multiple modernities.

Post-traditional society and detrationalization
As Thompson (1995: 89) notes, the thesis of detraditionalization marks a return to earlier ways of thinking about tradition and modernity, but not without some important innovations. To begin with, according to Giddens, for most of its history modernity has rebuilt tradition as it has dissolved it. In the early phases of modernisation, he argues, the persistence and recreation of tradition was central to the legitimation of (especially national) power and to the sense in which the state was able to impose itself upon relatively passive subjects (Giddens 1994: 56). It is only since the advent of a more advanced, globalised and reflexive phase of modernisation, pre-existing traditions have been increasingly disembedded from ‘situated local communities’ (Giddens 1994: 95), and most forms of social activity take place in contexts which are increasingly stripped of traditional mechanisms of support (Thompson 1996: 89).

In another departure from the classical version of the thesis, the idea of detraditionalization does not suggest that traditions have disappeared altogether from the modern world. As Giddens sees it, traditions survive in two forms; as discursively articulated and defended sources of values which, having lost their status as unquestioned truths, must be justified as having value in a universe of plural competing values; or as fundamentalisms which reject the call for discursive justification and seek to reassert the inviolable character of tradition (Giddens 1994:100).

Most distinctively, Beck and Giddens have given the idea of the decline of tradition a new focus, on processes of self-formation. Its pre-eminent theme is that in post-traditional societies, individuals are increasingly obliged to fall back on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves. As belief in pre-given or natural orders of things declines, individuals are
called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991).

Nonetheless, as they see it, the impact of detraditionalization has been significant enough to define a whole new type of - post-traditional - society. Reflexive modernization, marked by the twin processes of globalization and the destruction of local communities, has altered the balance between tradition and modernity, and the outcome is a society-wide undermining of the authority of the cultural metanarratives which once governed social life (Giddens 1994: 95).

**Multiple modernities and tradition**

The multiple modernities argument that traditions remain a constitutive force in modern life stands in stark contrast to the idea of detraditionalization. This seemingly diametrically opposed claim is based in part on empirical evidence of the continuing presence of traditions in contemporary societies. But it rests also on a very different understanding of tradition itself. In the next section, I will examine this idea of tradition in more detail. First, however, it will be helpful to set out the perspective’s general assumptions about the relation of tradition and modernity.

The key here is its explicit rejection of – and alternative to – the dichotomous conception of tradition and modernity that has characterised sociological thought. As noted earlier, despite, or perhaps because of, the part it has played in definitions of modernity, tradition has mostly been defined negatively, as the non-modern. And this has frequently resulted in a conceptual dichotomy which *prejudges* the relation between to the two terms: if modernity is defined as the
‘opposite’ or absence of tradition, it follows that traditions can have only a residual presence in the contemporary world, associated with imperfect modernity. This is the case, critics argue, in the detrationalisation literature (see for example Adam1996: 146). While Giddens accepts that traditions survive in modernity, they do so as we have seen only in limited, partial and non-modern ways. And the weight of his analysis is on the shift from traditional to post-traditional.

A number of critics have made the argument that the relation between tradition and modernity is more paradoxical than Giddens suggests. It is argued, for instance, that neither purely tradition-informed nor purely autonomous modes of being are possible. As Adam succinctly puts this point, all societies have traditions and ‘reflexivity is ontological to all of humanity’ (Adam 1996:139). Theorising modernity should therefore concentrate, it is argued, on coexistence and interpenetration with, rather than on replacement of, traditionally-governed behaviour.

The multiple modernities perspective shares the view that tradition and modernity are paradoxically related, and also stresses their interpenetration within the modern context. Importantly, however, for it the primary issue of interpenetration does not concern the persistence of ‘traditional’ forms of tradition, that is, the ongoing presence of traditions in premodern forms. Far from arguing that traditions persist unchanged, its central argument is that modernity radically transforms traditions. In the new historical context of modernity, it argues, traditions are reinterpreted and acquire new connotations. They are also at times fragmented, selectively reactivated and brought into new syntheses. Crucially, traditions in the modern world are marked by modern presuppositions and reconstructions. For the multiple modernities perspective, what is at issue is not continuity of particular beliefs, values or norms, and even less
of rituals, but rather of the persistence of identifiable and formative, but malleable and polymorphous patterns of meaning.

A brief look at how this understanding of the interplay of tradition and modernity appears in more concrete analyses will help show what is involved in these claims. To begin with, identifying with the ‘cultural turn’ that has characterised recent social theory, it accords a central place to cultural orientations in the constitution of social formations. In the case of modernity, this involves a break with definitions of modernity exclusively in terms of structural differentiation. Instead, it argues that the emergence of new conceptions of human autonomy and agency were a defining and constitutive feature of modernity. Crucially, it further argues that this new cultural orientation was from the outset interpreted in two divergent and partly conflictual ways, as ‘rational mastery’ on the one hand, and expressivity and self-questioning on the other.

In the case of the western – the first and to date most globally influential - model, these cultural orientations were embedded in and acquired their specific connotations from the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions, and found social embodiments in capitalism and democracy, among others institutions and practices. In this context, it is relevant, too, that these orientations were also rooted in premodern traditions. As Alain Touraine has shown, they have roots in the Christian view of the world as both created by a divine subject, and organised in accordance with rational laws. As he sees it, the upheavals of modernity transformed the idea of rational construction into science, and the breaking of the link between the divine subject and human subject set free self-expression (Touraine 1995: 205).
In the case of non-western modernities, the multiple modernities approach argues that, despite being undermined and fragmented by globalising forces, diverse civilisational legacies retain the capacity to interact with and reinterpret the western traditions which partly define modernity, to an extent which justifies the idea of distinct versions of modernity (Arnason 2007: np) (Civilisational traditions, which define – and differentiate – macro historical, macro social and macro cultural groupings - are not the only traditions which play a role in creating multiple modernities, but they are a useful and meaningful unit of analysis for a comparative approach to modernity.)

**Conceptualising tradition**

As noted earlier, however, the diverging conclusions the detraditionalisation and multiple modernities theses draw concerning the fate of tradition in modernity stem in part from their understandings of what tradition is. To conclude, I identify the main differences, paying particular attention to the distinctive features of the multiple modernities conception.

Both perspectives identify significant limitations in the notion of tradition inherited from classical sociology (Giddens 1994: 62; Arnason 2007), and their criticisms converge at several points. Mostly seen as involving ‘information transfer across time and space’, tradition was assumed to be to do with cyclical processes that immobilise time, and to be stable and self-evident, and as involving unquestioned and unthinking action. Such conceptions ignore the fact that tradition is an active process, something that is created afresh at each moment of renewal, and involves the creative reconstruction of past beliefs and commitments.
Yet significant differences remain. Giddens, for whom tradition is closely bound up with collective memory, takes pains to stress the active, interpretive and social processes involved, and acknowledges that, in traditions, the past is continuously reconstructed on the basis of the present (Giddens 1994: 64). Nonetheless, his elaboration of the concept has a strong emphasis on ritual and repetition. ‘We continually reproduce memories of past happenings or states’, he says, and ‘these repetitions confer continuity upon experience’ (Giddens 1994:63). Furthermore, tradition usually involves ritual (this is what enmeshes tradition in practice), and although he underlines the fact that ritual always has to be interpreted (involving at least some degree of active reflexivity), as he sees it, such interpretation is normally in the hands of ‘guardians’, who invoke a ‘formulaic notion of truth’ - the attribution of causal efficacy to ritual - to defend both the tradition and their guardianship of it (Giddens 1994:63).

The multiple modernities perspective also sets itself in opposition to conceptions which deny or obscure the creativity and organic character of traditions. For it, however, there is a further problem, which stems from the ‘a priori and invidious’ dichotomy of tradition and modernity set up in classical sociology. This is the ‘levelling’ that reduced the vast spectrum of traditional societies to a single, stereotyped opposite of modernity (Arnason 2003: 311). The issue here is that when traditions are seen primarily in terms of their role in replicating social behaviour and thought, they appear to be the same everywhere. The resultant singular conception of tradition is the mirror image of the singular image of modernity. The civilisational approach therefore insists not only on the creativity of traditions, but also on their diversity (Arnason 2007: np).
The perspective’s emphasis on the (civilisational) diversity of traditions is an important factor in the way its conception of tradition has been (and continues to be) developed. In the space that remains, I will outline some salient features, focusing in particular on the ongoing rethinking of the concept Arnason has undertaken. My argument is that it is Arnason’s hermeneutical understanding of culture that gives the perspective’s conception of tradition its most distinctive features. Although I cannot argue it here, I hope this account also suggests that the hermeneutical cast of the concept is also an important source of its interpretive power (for a fuller account of this argument, see Ballantyne 2001).

The most general hermeneutical feature of the concept of tradition is that it gives priority to the symbolic contents of traditions over their functions. Like other conceptions, the multiple modernities notion incorporates both symbolic and practical components. But where many, including Giddens, underline the ritual dimension, their relative weights are reversed in the multiple modernities perspective. For Eisenstadt, traditions are ‘routinized symbolisations’. A tradition, he suggests is ‘the constellation of the codes... which delineate the limits of the binding cultural order’ along with ‘the modes of evaluation as well as of the sanctioning and legitimation of the ‘totality’ of the cultural and social order’ (Eisenstadt, 1973: 139).

For Arnason, too, the symbolic and more broadly cultural, component is primary. Importantly, however, he rejects Eisenstadt’s tendency to speak of culture in terms of ‘programs’ or ‘codes’, and to develop a more open and flexible account of socially constitutive cultural orientations, he adopts a hermeneutical understanding of culture. Drawing on Hans Georg Gadamer’s notion of effective history, he underscores both the formative role of culture in social life, but also its
malleability. From this point of view, traditionality in its broadest sense refers not to a subset of cultural orientations and social practices, but to a fundamental feature of culture itself. Culture has its influence, on individuals and on institutions, in the mode of tradition. However, its influence can only operate through particular cultural constellations, that is, through the specific, concrete interpretive frameworks that are more commonly referred to as traditions.

A number of features of traditions thus conceived can be identified. Firstly, tradition and traditionality are omnipresent and constitutive aspects of social life (Arnason 2003). Among the implications of this point relevant to the perspective’s analysis of modernity is that the defining cultural orientations of modernity co-constitute its social practices and institutions, including the political, economic and cultural socio-cultural spheres (Arnason 2002). Secondly, traditions are characterised by historical plasticity. Extrapolating from Gadamer’s argument that traditions are open to reinterpretation in new historical circumstances, Arnason conceives of the traditions which condition social thought and action as identifiable patterns of meaning open to a range of reinterpretations. The outcomes of such reinterpretations are not pre-determined, but unfold within the parameters set by the symbolic components which define particular traditions. (Arnason 2002: 151). Thirdly, traditions are neither univocal nor unified. Arnason invokes Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the ‘conflict of interpretations’ (1974) to amplify this point. Because all symbolic meaning is polysemic, it is permanently open to not simply multiple, but rival interpretations. Transposed to the analysis of modernity, this insight highlights the tension internal to the defining cultural orientations of modern social formations. Fourthly, the perpetuation of traditions is a matter of permanent constructive and reconstructive activity. Finally, traditions have multiple dimensions and ‘functions’. The hermeneutical cast of the
conception of tradition allows it to encompass interpretive, normative, identity and legitimation aspects. (Eisenstadt 1973: 139; Arnason 2007: np). It is this feature which allows the full weight of the presence of traditions in the modern world to be appreciated. In contrast to those who see the essence of traditionality exclusively as the upholding of criteria of sacredness, pastness or origin, it brings to light the often taken for granted, but pervasive influence the internally conflictual and malleable, but profoundly formative, traditions which animate modern life.

References


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\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\text{The only systematic exception to this trend is Edward Shils’ 1981 work, Tradition London: Faber}\]