

Culture



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Creating Tradition

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By Richard Handler
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To speak of the creation of tradition presents a paradox, for, according to common sense, tradition is not created but received. Tradition is what is handed down, unchanged and unchanging, from the past. Yet to posit the immutability of tradition entails an epistemology that confers upon symbolic constellations such as traditions an objectivity, a boundedness, that they might not possess. There has been a growing awareness within anthropology that the boundaries of cultures, traditions, societies, and groups cannot be separated from actors' understandings of them: in recent studies of ethnicity and nationalism, and of the anthropological encounter with other peoples, the term "construction" has become a preferred word to refer to the ongoing creation of social reality on the part of both "natives" and "observers." The boundaries of "a" culture, tradition, or group are seen to depend upon actors' (including anthropologists') presuppositions, and this suggests not only that such boundaries are vague and shifting—this has been uneasily admitted for some time—but, more fundamentally, that we ought not to attribute an objectified, thing-like existence to the "social facts" which those boundaries, presumably, delineate. In brief, recent consideration of how people construct collective identities and boundaries has been one aspect of an ongoing shift from what I shall call an atomistic epistemology to one more semiotic (Handler, 1984; Handler and

Linnekin, 1984). In the present review I contrast two recent works concerned with traditions and their creation in order to elaborate this distinction.

Edward Shils' *Tradition* is a rambling yet engaging work. It is not as conceptually precise as an earlier essay (1971) of the same title, being more concerned to analyze "what difference tradition makes in human life" (p. vii). It is above all a discussion of those Weberian antipodes, tradition and rationality. Shils begins by questioning the anti-traditionality of modern society, and he never strays far from this theme. Ideologies and outlooks which rose to dominance during and after the Enlightenment—rationalism, scientism, hedonism, individualism, emancipationism (p. 303)—have been concerned to eradicate not only particular traditions of the *ancien régime*, but what Shils calls substantive traditionality as well—that is, respect for tradition, or, more precisely, traditional beliefs and institutions consciously legitimated by reference to their traditionality. In brief, "the central tradition of the rationalizing outlook is the belief in the superiority of the new to the old" (p. 319). Here is a paradox that Shils repeatedly insists upon: anti-traditionality has become traditional in modern society, and those who question such aspects of this tradition as "the redemptive powers of scientific knowledge" (p. 23) or "progressivistic legislation" (p. 189) risk being called reactionary or worse.

But Shils questions modern antitraditionality in another way, by insisting on the ineluctability of tradition. All human actions, whether supremely creative or repetitive and imitative, depend upon a given cultural context. Creativity can only develop out of, and in opposition to, the creations of the past. The idea of the "totally new" is "ludicrous" (p. 198): even revolutionaries ground their attacks on a tradition in other traditions, or in certain aspects of the tradition attacked (Marxism, for example, shares with capitalism both its scientism and its materialism). And, in a passage that calls to mind Sapir's conception of the "genuine culture," Shils writes that "genius seeks tradition," for only by "submission" to the wisdom and accomplishments of the past can great minds gain "independence" from them. Thus, even when the past is transcended, the relationship between genius and tradition remains dialectical rather than antithetical: those

who create “move forward” from traditions “while remaining within them” (p. 119).

In his analysis of the relationship of creation and tradition, Shils presents a dialectical account of tradition that stems from Weber’s notions of charisma and its routinization. This dialectical mode is compatible with what I have called a semiotic epistemology: traditions are not presented as static, completed, and objectified things; they are, rather, symbolic realities that change each time they are apprehended. Perhaps it would be better to say that their existence is one of perpetual re-emergence: they exist only as they are constructed by symboling actors and each construction of a tradition, while referring to and depending upon past constructions, is necessarily a reinterpretation. Thus, as Shils insists, traditions change continuously, even as they are perpetuated. For example, a religious tradition may stem from a sacred text which is presumed to be unchanging, but the text is inseparable from an ongoing process of interpretation—for only through interpretation can the meaning of the text be grasped: “The sacred text, although putatively the same text... undergoes revision through the interpretations which are made of it” (p. 108). The same is true in scientific and artistic traditions, in historiography and the reconstruction of past traditions, and even in the humblest traditions of daily life: in all, “there is no such thing as survival intact” (p. 175). Moreover, the very incompleteness of tradition offers possibilities to imagination: “Every tradition, given though it is, opens potentialities for a diversity of responses” (p. 44). In other words, the limitations of the given are open-ended: they are the grounds for an inexhaustible quest for meaning that Shils sees as part of human nature.

Given this insistence on the open-endedness of tradition—on a perpetual spiral of creation and re-interpretation, charisma and routinization—it is disconcerting to find that Shils relies heavily on an atomistic approach to the analysis of tradition. This stems perhaps from the Durkheimian element in Parsonian sociology—the emphasis on norms, social integration, and the classification of discrete social facts. For example, Shils’ formal definition of tradition entails a reification directly contrary to the semiotic approach reviewed above: “In its barest, most elementary sense, it [tradition] means simply a *traditum*; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (p. 12). Shils immediately qualifies this definition by introducing the notions of re-interpretation and change, yet even change is envisioned atomistically, as Shils stresses the combination of

invariant elements while overlooking the constitutive (or structural) role of the relationships among them:

Even in the course of a short chain of transmission over three generations, a tradition is very likely to undergo some changes. Its essential elements persist in combination with other elements which change, but what makes it a tradition is that what are thought to be the essential elements are recognizable by an external observer as being approximately identical at successive steps or acts of transmission (pp. 13-14).

Here, then, is a dilemma: why should we speak of “essential elements” when traditions change ceaselessly? The notion of an essential element (“recognizable by an external observer”) suggests that a phenomenon can be definitively identified in terms of some central feature or attribute. Identifying essential elements allows us to specify the boundaries of particular traditions, yet why must we reify traditions by providing boundaries for them when we are constantly forced to admit that those boundaries are vague, that traditions are only “approximately identical” from moment to moment?

This atomistic epistemology has several ramifications. One is a pseudo-quantification of tradition, as Shils speaks repeatedly of *how much* of a tradition is transmitted (as if detachable pieces of one tradition, assimilated into another, could enter into new relationships while remaining what they were in the former). Another is Shils’ repeated use of the metaphors of “stocks” and “possessions.” Individuals “possess” or “bear” traditions, and those acts or ideas which are not possessed are “lost”: “An original proposition which breaks from tradition and which does not enter into a tradition is ‘lost.’ If it is not in the stock, and does not pass into the possession of others, it must be declared to be lost” (p. 90). This notion makes sense within an atomistic frame of reference, but not in a semiotic epistemology, where meaning exists as active thought, as present-tense interpretation, but can never be captured as a thing whose essence is fixed. To claim that an idea or object is lost suggests that it once had an identity which was resistant to, or transcended, all interpretation. It makes equal sense to say that every time a creation is reinterpreted it is lost, since through reinterpretation it becomes something different.

Perhaps the most serious corollary of an atomistic understanding of tradition is the distinction between genuine and spurious traditions. Shils connects spurious traditions with political ideologies, particularly nationalism. He points out that nationalistic revivals of tradition inevitably change them (p. 246). This observation is perfectly

compatible with Shils' repeated insistence on the selectivity (pp. 26, 53) and reinterpretation that accompany the transmission of tradition. Yet now Shils speaks of "deformative" (p. 60) and "fictitious" (p. 209) traditionality, and opposes nationalistic to "scientific critical historiography": "Sometimes the desire to vindicate the tradition of nationality overpowered the concern for adherence to the tradition of critical historiography as a means of purifying tradition, of making it truthful" (p. 60). And though Shils admits that modern historiography is itself a tradition, he does not question (or relativize) its criteria of truthfulness. Discussing advances in biblical scholarship, for example, he speaks of "a more accurate tradition" and "more refined knowledge" of the past (p. 56). By contrast, Shils assumes that the "reconstructed" traditions of nationalist movements are less truthful than "actually existing syncretic traditions" (p. 246). But, we might ask, according to what criteria does one type of historical revisionism constitute refinement, and another distortion?

It is at this point that a comparison to Michael Herzfeld's monograph becomes germane. *Ours Once More* discusses the role of folklore scholarship in the elaboration of a Greek national identity. It concentrates on the "Hellenist" ideology that dominated the study of folklore in nineteenth-century Greece after the establishment of independence. Greek patriots, in some measure, owed their national existence to "European patronage" (p. 7), both political and ideological. The political debt was a function of the international power politics of the time (and Herzfeld shows in some detail how arguments about folklore reflected individual scholars' assessments of international relations [pp. 5-7, 76-77]). The ideological debt was two-fold: first, nationalism itself was an import from Western Europe and, second, the Hellenist identity that Greek politicians and scholars wished to validate was based upon European traditions of Classical scholarship. Confronted by "the obvious discontinuities between Hellenic ideal and Greek actuality" (p. 19)—the actuality of a largely illiterate peasantry that had lived for centuries under Ottoman rule—educated Europeans might well have doubted that the Greeks were "the true descendants of the ancient Hellenes" (p. 3). It was this that Greek folklorists set out to prove, and in the process they constructed an account of Greek folk traditions which was, paradoxically yet understandably, dominated by the categories and assumptions of foreign (European) scholarship.

Much of *Ours Once More* consists of close analysis of folklore monographs which dealt with

specific issues related to the problem of Greek national identity; the question of cultural continuity, the relationship of Classical epic and tragedy to latter-day folk poetry, of Orthodox Christianity to the pagan religious traditions of antiquity. Describing his work as "a history of history as well as an ethnography of culture theory" (p. ix), Herzfeld aims throughout at what he calls a semiotic analysis of the folklorists' worldview. He attempts to show how folklorists constructed accounts of Greek traditions and identity, and explicates, in particular, the criteria of relevance by which folk customs were deemed "recognizably Greek":

Implicit in this operation is a set of assumptions, not merely about folksongs but about vernacular culture in general: certain things were *Greek*, others were not, and the validating criterion was a demonstrable link with antiquity (p. 85).

Needless to say, "demonstrable" links to antiquity must themselves be constructed according to criteria which are established, as Herzfeld shows, in relation to particular scholarly traditions.

Most laudable in Herzfeld's approach is his explicit disavowal of any privileged point of view. "How," he asks, "can we be sufficiently confident of our own sense of Greek folklore to be able to make a critical examination of the original collectors' work" (p. 9). And he answers this question by reorienting it:

An anthropologist does not try to expose informants' "ignorance" of their cultural universe; it is only possible to say something about how they perceive and articulate that universe. In much the same spirit, our aim here is not to challenge the factual basis of early Greek folklore studies or to treat their motivating principles as somehow erroneous. Since we are treating the scholarly sources as "informants" out of the past, we should no more attempt to debate with them than we would consciously force a living informant to adopt a particular anthropological theory (p. 10).

This will not satisfy those who seek to distinguish genuine from spurious traditions, but it makes sense, once again, within a semiotic epistemology which admits, as Herzfeld puts it, that "all descriptions are saturated with presuppositions about what is relevant" (p. ix). "All descriptions" include, of course, anthropological accounts, which in turn include indigenous anthropological accounts—such as those of the Greek folklorists—as well as indigenous accounts which are less reflexive.

The two works reviewed in this essay differ in intention, scope, and style, and neither is wholly successful in mastering the problems that it sets itself. Shils aims at a grand theoretical state-

ment—he observes in the preface that there has been no comprehensive treatment of tradition (p. vii)—but the level of generalization will alienate some readers, particularly anthropologists, who by inclination and training are suspicious of sweeping assertions about human nature. Herzfeld espouses a carefully relativistic stance that is well suited to the explication of nationalist ideology, but his analysis of what will be (for most readers) obscure texts suffers from the lack of a transparent organization. As is often the case with the writings of symbolic anthropologists, Herzfeld's ability to relativize both epistemological and narrative (or literary) assumptions leaves him without a ready-made format (a tradition!) for the presentation of his arguments: what narrative techniques should we use to write a history about the development of the cultural presuppositions that underlie the writing of history? By contrast, Shils is supremely confident as a stylist, but, as I have suggested, his epistemology is often muddled. Fair enough: the strengths as well as the weaknesses of both of these books are compatible with the study of tradition, which concerns both epistemology and style.

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Is a Global Culture History Possible?

Eric WOLF, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1982. 503 pages, US \$29.95 (cloth), US \$8.95 (paper).

By Gavin Smith
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Cultural Anthropology justifies its existence on the grounds that either the people studied are quaint and their difference is, of itself, interesting,

or that the study of other people is in some way relevant to the home society which produces anthropologists.

The 'quaint' argument suggests that anthropologists are useful insofar as they translate the cryptic texts of alien cultures into comprehensible terms. That is why this kind of anthropologist is caught in a perpetual dilemma, for too good a translation might disintegrate the Other whose distinctiveness they are at pains to demonstrate. It is an anthropology of many veils and its project will never be completed.

It is possible that such a project might be interesting but not very important, except of course to professional anthropologists who write in journals and possibly to the objects of their study who do not read the journals. But there is a moral imperative here which has a proud tradition in the profession: fighting the war against ethnocentrism.

The 'relevance' argument is that the understanding of cultures which are not at the moment hegemonic is important; this also has its moral imperative. It may have to do with the possibilities of making development schemes work among 'other cultures' who continually mess them up, or it may have to do with a more revolutionary sentiment having to do with the character of struggle in non-western societies.

But this kind of anthropology was dealt a hard blow by Gundar Frank, and subsequent attempts by anthropologists to bed down with the avenging angel by embracing the notion of 'dependency' have only confirmed the subordinate position of the discipline. For *all* the cultures of interest to anthropologists were simply epiphenomena: the outer ripples on the wave of western expansionism.

Dependency theory may have had many and better predecessors but none whose arrival anthropologists themselves took so seriously. People whose very trade should have mitigated against it began to generalize about 'peripheral societies' with easy abandon. But nothing could disguise the fact that, in the last analysis, this was all necrophology. (Worsley wrote a dismal article called "The End of Anthropology", which may have been a play on words, but he slipped over into the Sociology Department nonetheless.)

It may be that anthropology is best preserved in a shrinking scholarly community by stressing the quaintness of its object. Be that as it may, it will always be hard to disregard entirely the power of those Frankian, Wallersteinian and Marxian arguments which stress the otherworldly importance of capitalist expansion. And anyway, at the moment of their ascendancy, anthropology had