Tradition and Modernity:
Models from the Past

Tradition and modernity are the most troubling concepts in cultural analysis. We are never quite sure what they mean. The sense we give to modernity depends to some degree on what we think of as tradition. One society's traditions can easily become another's modernity, like the venerable African masks that occasionally inspired the cubist art of Braque and Picasso.

The field of study is also somewhat unbalanced. There are dozens of works on modernity, and many more if one includes related notions like modernism, modernization, and post-modernism. There are far fewer inquiries into the nature of tradition, and few indeed that have a theoretical dimension. Eisenstadt, Shils, and Heesterman[1] have attempted to reverse this trend. But they remain exceptions to the general neglect of tradition among social scientists.

The negative feelings about tradition have historical roots. Since the Enlightenment, «tradition» and «change» have generally been looked upon as opposites. The term normally applied to social, economic, or cultural transformations is «modernity». Most post-Enlightenment philosophies equate modernity and change. Via Kant and Hegel, the connection entered the social sciences: we find it reproduced in a similar fashion by thinkers as diverse in establishing reasons for change as Marx, Durkheim, and Max Weber.

With modernity identified with change, and by implication with the positive values associated with progress, tradition automatically came to mean the culturally changeless and historically immobile. In classical sociological theory, tradition is most easily defined as the

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[1] See S.N. Eisenstadt, *Post-Traditional Societies* (New York, 1972), *Tradition, Change, and Modernity* (New York, 1973), and S.N. Eisenstadt and S.R. Graubard, eds., *Intellectuals and Tradition* (New York, 1973); Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981); and J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essays in Indial Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago, 1985).

stage of society from which we all emerged. In the 18th century, this usually meant the Middle Ages; in the 19th and 20th, it has also come to mean primitive, non-western societies.

Since the 19th century, when medieval studies was recognized as a branch of professional historical inquiry, medievalists have reacted strongly against the view that theirs was a period of social or cultural immobility. In general, the discipline adopted the opposite ideology. The defence of their age as a period of progressive change has created an emotional bond among medievalists who often have little else in common.

Demonstrations of medieval «modernity» have multiplied in our time. The theses in the field are so numerous that they hardly merit extensive review. Among popular books, one thinks of Jacques Le Goff's *Les intellectuels au Moyen Age* (1957), Eugène Vinaver's *The Rise of Romance* (1972), or Colin Morris's *The Discovery of the Individual* (1972). The terms *modernus* and the rare substantive *modernitas* have been the subject of inquiries by Chenu, Curtius, Jeauneau, Silvestre, Hartmann, and Gössmann[2]. In the background stands a larger modernizing thesis, that of the «renaissance of the 12th century»[3]. The details of such studies vary, but the message is the same. They say that the Middle Ages was a time of change, of incipient modernity. Change is modernity, modernity is change. And, to most historians, this seems to be ethically right.

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[2]   M.-D. Chenu, «Antiqui, moderni», *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 17 (1928), 82-94; E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W.R. Trask (New York and Evanston, 1963), 251-255, 385, 484; Edouard Jeauneau, «'Nani gigantum humeris insidentes'. Essai d'interprétation de Bernard de Chartres», in *Lectio Philosophorum. Recherches sur l'Ecole de Chartres* (Amsterdam, 1973), 55-73; Hubert Silvestre, «'Quanto iuniores, tanto perspicaciores'. Antécédents à la Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes», in *Recueil commémoratif du Xe anniversaire de la Faculté de philosophie et lettres* (de Kinshasa), (Louvain and Paris, 1968), 231-255; W. Hartmann, «'Modernus' und 'Antiquus': Zur Verbreitung und Bedeutung dieser Bezeichnungen in der wissenschaftlichen Literatur vom 9. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert», in A. Zimmermann, ed., *Antiqui et Moderni: Traditionsbewusstsein und Fortschrittsbewusstsein im späten Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1974), 21-39; and Elisabeth Gössmann, *Antiqui und Moderni im Mittelalter. Eine geschichtliche Standortbestimmung* (Munich, Paderborn, and Vienna, 1974).

[3]   For a recent review of the issues, see above all Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable eds., with Carol D. Lanham, *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

There is nothing wrong with this approach, except that it leaves the concept of tradition in limbo. For, in this way of looking at things, modernity can have many facets, but tradition only one. Oddly enough, this narrowing of perspective is not only typical of studies of medieval modernity. One also finds it in books that lodge their values in tradition, such as were popular in Germany and France during the 1930s. In order to serve their ideological purposes too, tradition was viewed as a monolith. Just as medievalists have established paradigms of change in the Middle Ages, they have helped to create the myth of medieval tradition as a reference point for immobile values[4].

But is tradition immobile? I think not. A great deal depends on what we mean by tradition. This is what we have not sorted out, either as medievalists or as theorists of culture.

In agreement with Edward Shils, Jerzy Szacki, and Martin Krygier[5], I would propose that there are at least three elements in tradition which should be included in any discussion of culture and institutions. There are pastness, authoritative presence, and the means of transmission.

Traditions may not be very old, and they can be invented for economic or political motives[6]. Yet, for traditionalism to work, they must be perceived as belonging to the past. They are part of a narrative of social development which begins in the past and leads to the present. As regards the rationalities that affect decision-making, this means that the past carries greater weight than the present. The past influences, even determines, what is to be done now and in the future. The past can harbour diverse beliefs, values, and motives. However, in traditional thinking, such differences are minimized. Tradition bestows on past experience an overriding sense of unity.

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[4] For a recent example of the genre, distorting the work of some French and German scholars, see John Van Engen, «The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem», *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 519-552.

[5] I am indebted to Martin Krygier for this summary of his, Shils, and Szacki's central themes. Jerzy Szacki's views are found in *Tradycja. Przeglad problematyki* (Warsaw, 1971), and are conveniently summarized by Krygier, «Tipologia della tradizione», *Intersezioni* (5 (1985), 221-249, and «Law as Tradition», *Law and Philosophy* 5 (1986), 237-262. For Shils' views, see *Tradition* (Chicago, 1981).

[6] See E.J. Hobsbawm and Terence Tanger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

Yet, if traditions are past, they are also present. This presentness can be embodied in a charismatic prophet or represented in the on-going institutions of law and government. It can work through the author of a single text, a holy book, or through the more mundane accumulation of codes and archives[7]. Through the human or artificial memory of the past, tradition holds the present in its grasp. Of course, traditions refer to what really took place as well as to much that did not. Arthurian legends and courtly love both inspired behavioural reactions in the fourteenth century, but it is doubtful if either referred back to actual social practices. I should add, not necessarily in a Lacanian sense, that the past can function without an authoritative presence via the unconscious. One thinks of taboos, kinship rules, and some purificatory rituals.

Finally, for traditions to be operative in society, they must be transmitted. There is not only a *traditum*; there is also a *traditio*. In the Middle Ages, this means by oral, written, or visual communication. The type of transmission is not neutral: it is rooted in politics and institutions, and it helps to shape the message it transmits. The manner in which a tradition is handed over from one generation to the next is a clue to its place in the social fabric and to the source of its legitimizing power. It also tells us something about the relation of forms of community behaviour over time. In an age of record-keeping, incipient bureaucracy, and written law like the early 13th century, the oral transmission of feudal rights and ritualized gift-giving means something different from what it meant two centuries earlier. For, in a society that acknowledges the authority of written communication, those who record and edit the past have a means of controlling the future that is inaccessible to non-literates[8]. In these circumstances, the act of writing up a society's past is tantamount to recreating its culture[9].

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[7] See Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, 1986), ch. 1 and 3, pp. 1-44 and 87-126.

[8] See Keith Michael Baker, «Memory and Practice: Politics and the Representation of the Past in Eighteenth-Century France», *Representations* 11 (1985), 134-164.

[9] See the essays in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1986).

There is one other feature of tradition which I think important for understanding the Middle Ages, although it is not often mentioned in the standard accounts of the subject. This is the geographical dimension. The coalescing of a tradition often corresponds to the settlement and organization of a society within definable geographical boundaries, for which the writing down of traditions acts like a set of intellectual fenceposts. In the early Middle Ages, the Visigothic, Frankish, and other Germanic law codes can be viewed in this light; and, in a similar sense we speak of Anglo-Norman tradition after the Conquest. The organization of tradition reflects the need to give an intellectual definition to a socio-geographic reality. The hold of the past is not only legal and cultural. It is also spatial. It is expressed in land and people, who are geographically placed, and may think they are divinely ordained, to mirror a particular tradition. Churches monumentalize these relations in medieval Europe, as do temple sites in southeast Asia[10], while pilgrimages ritualize relations between the centers and peripheries of religious experience[11].

This outline of the typical features of traditions could be extended. But a mere enumeration does not tell us how tradition actually brings about change. This issue demands a different approach.

Before turning to this, one final caveat. If we are to come to grips with how tradition works, we must not only distance ourselves from the ideological positions that favour tradition or modernity. It is also necessary to abandon the naïve dichotomy «traditional/modern»[12]. For here the traditional does not derive its sense from empirical or historical inquiry. The meaning arises from the rhetorical necessity of finding an opposite to «the modern». This is definition by default.

Now, there is something in societal change which corresponds roughly to the traditional and the modern, even if we speak of it in other terms. But the meaning of the pair cannot be firmly grounded

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[10]   See Deborah Winslow, «A Political Geography of Deities: Space and the Pantheon of Sinhalese Buddhism», *Journal of Asian Studies* 43 (1984), 273-291.

[11]   See Victor Turner, «Pilgrimages as Social Processes», in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London, 1974), 166-230.

[12]   Cf. Dean C. Tipps, «Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective», *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14 (1973), 205-216.

until various types of traditions are themselves sorted out. Traditions are not all the same, and they do not react similarly in the face of change. Nor do societies change all at once: most are not traditional or modern but rather some combination of the two, as Levy, Geertz, and others illustrate[13]. Tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive; they are mutually interdependent. If we date a society's change from the point at which the dichotomy traditional/modern is articulated, we are not really establishing very much. For we have not explained how the society got where it is, or why.

All medieval society was traditional in some sense. However, at various periods, it is possible to distinguish between what I would call traditional and traditionalistic action. Traditional action is substantive. It consists of the habitual pursuit of inherited forms of conduct, which are taken to be society's norm. Traditionalistic action, by contrast, is the self-conscious affirmation of traditional norms. It is the establishment of such norms as articulated models for current and future behaviour. These guidelines imperfectly reflect the past, since at a given time individuals are only in contact with a part of their cultural heritage. Indeed, one of the features of traditionalistic action is that norms are consciously selected from the fund of traditional knowledge in order to serve present needs.

One does not have to look hard for examples of traditionalistic activity in medieval culture. They appear regularly in every «reform» or «renaissance» between later antiquity and the fifteenth century. They are particularly visible during the critical reassessment of the Christian heritage which took place during the eleventh and twelfth. Wherever we look, we find a return to past models. Between 1057 and 1075, the Milanese Patarenes, invoking ancient precedents, battled against the entrenched rights of married priests. During the same century, traditionalism took a more intellectual form in the ecclesiological thought of Peter Damian and Gregory VII. Towards 1100, another variant is found in the wandering preachers of the northwest, such as Robert of Arbrissel, Bernard of Tiron, Vitalis of Savigny, and Norbert of Xanten. Their message was a literal imitation

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[13] See Marion J. Levy, *Modernization and the Structure of Societies* (Princeton, 1966); Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, 1966); and, more generally, Reinhard Bendix, «Tradition and Modernity Reconsidered», *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 9 (1967), 292-346.

of the life of Christ as related in the gospels, while, in a different set-
ting, Peter the Hermit preached an apocalyptic return to the age of
the apostles once the Holy Land was in Christian hands. A generation
later, Henry the Monk and Peter of Bruis, two preachers disappointed
at the lack of rigour in the Gregorian reforms, taught that Chris-
tianity should shed the accretions it had acquired since New Testa-
ment times. Even antisemitism and dualism, two other popular
religious tendencies in the period, had traditionalizing elements.
Antisemitism had political roots, but anti-Jewish tracts invariably
placed the central Jewish crime, the murder of Christ, in the distant
past. The dualist contrasted a primitive state of affairs, a world of
pure spirit, with the contamination of a material civilization that had
grown up over time. There were many other versions of the tradi-
tionalizing thesis. Looking forward, one can see it diversely inter-
preted in the idea of *imitatio* in Peter Waldo and St. Francis.

At this point, an obvious quesiton comes to mind. If all this is
tradition, where is modernity?

The answer lies in looking more closely at what is happening.
What I am describing is a widening gap between two sorts of activity,
the traditional and the traditionalistic. This sometimes involves a
dissociation between the practical and the theoretical, that is, be-
tween the habitual activity which merely continues past practices
without reflecting on them and self-conscious innovation based on
the recovery of an allegedly authentic tradition. Thus Gregory VII is
fond of distinguishing between «custom» and «truth». But there
may also be a separation of the substantive and the formal, as for
instance when canonists and churchmen joined forces in the thir-
teenth century to create an ecclesiastical bureaucracy in which great
weight was placed on «rational» decision-making.

However we label these changes, their essence lies in ratiocination
applied to tradition. The past is thought about, codified, and, as an
abstraction, made a guide for action. The models may be simple, and
rest on nothing more than a reaffirmation of the *Rule*; or they may
be full-scale utopian schemes like those of Joachim of Fiore. Viewed
in the light of their common features, they constitute one of the
period's strongest endogenous forces for change. For, as the distance
widened between the contrasting notions of tradition, the acceptance
of the past and the rethinking of the past parted ways. There were
equally valid but incompatible interpretations of what tradition
meant. Traditionalistic action became a statement of past norms of

conduct, not as they were but as they were thought to be. And this restatement was considered by «reformers» to be more correct, truthful, and consistent than the welter of inherited customs which had been handed down from one generation to the next. The final stage of this evolution was the labelling of the two types of tradition in ways that brought about the contrast. One remained known as tradition. The other emerged as modernity.

Tradition is said to be created by the consciousness of modernity, much in the way that oral culture is set in relief by writing. But, in the Middle Ages, modernity was more often than not the creation of tradition. For, if the forces for interpreting stability and change came chiefly from within tradition, then modernity is meaningful only as an aspect of traditionalistic behaviour. Modernity, in this sense, occurs when the distance between the traditional and the traditionalistic is so great that the models can no longer be reconciled within individuals' minds. Practice now seems to dictate theory which the rationalized models supersede, and theory implies practices out of harmony with traditional norms. The great religious controversies of the eleventh and twelfth centuries — the debate over the Gregorian reforms, the rise and decline of monasticism, the tensions over investiture, and the growth of heresy and dissent — were all movements that involved a differing perception of the past. Forms of traditionalistic action, as they passed from spontaneous to routinized types of behaviour, even created new traditions in their wake.

True, modernity did not always emerge from tradition. Individuals occasionally saw themselves as breaking cleanly with what had always been thought and done. It is possible to read the initial chapters of Abelard's story in this way. One also thinks of Héloïse, and, in a more psychological sense, of Hildegard of Bingen. In the thirteenth century, spiritual Franciscans like Peter John Olivi believed that the apostolic life could only be achieved through a decisive break with the historically evolving institutions of the Church. There are other examples of discontinuity. One thinks of the growing merchant class in the towns, who lived in an ethical halfway house between salvation and profitability; or Jewish bankers and physicians, who had no vital interest in the perpetuation of Christian tradition; or of women in general, whom the traditions of the Church had so completely isolated that they could only achieve meaningful participation in religion through a symbolic inversion of its accepted

procedures. Such individuals and groups are modern in a new sense. They think of themselves as belonging to an age whose internal coherence is more important than its links with the past; an age that is confident of its bearings and intellectual direction in contrast to the legacy of the southern Mediterranean world; and an age ready to complain of the lack of recognition of its achievements in the name of blind adherence to tradition. Just as the economy of northwest Europe was enjoying its first surplus, so its thinkers were discovering new meanings for leisure. They were less embarrassed than they had been in the past at their society's *novitas*.

Yet, however we single out the poor, the marginal, the sexually disfavoured, and the period's new men, it remains an inescapable reality of medieval life that none of these groups initiated major social or cultural changes before the thirteenth century. These all came from within the mainstream, where modernity had different associations. Modernity did not come to a «traditional» society from the outside, like British government to Mughal India. It came from medieval society itself. The first sense of *modernus* in medieval Latin was that of a temporal distinctiveness from the age of the early Christians, either within the patristic age itself or in the writings of ninth-century reformers. As time went on, *moderni* emerged in the various medieval disciplines, such as logic and theology, in which there was a clear contrast between older and more recent practices. In the twelfth century, when *modernitas* first emerges as an idea capable of characterizing an age, its proponents are still looking backwards[14]. In the *Anticlaudianus*, Alan of Lille's *novus homo* is both a new and a renewed man[15].

It is important not to be deceived by the period's false modernities. Modernity may be a definitive break with the past; but it may be nothing more than the reassertion of a neglected aspect of tradition. And at times it may be both. The two sides in the eucharistic debate between the ninth and the twelfth centuries both appeal to tradition. But both are modernist, since no such debate took place among the ancients and its scholastic solution would have been inconceivable in the patristic age. Again, modernity can masquerade

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[14]   See Gössmann, *Antiqui und Moderni*, ch. 2-3, pp. 20-62.
[15]   See *Anticlaudianus*, ed. R. Bossuat (Paris, 1955), *liber* 9, vv. 380-409, pp. 196-197.

as tradition. The codification of feudal and customary law in Europe from the twelfth century created a realm of traditional practices, just as, in nineteenth-century West Africa, colonial administrators defined for the natives what was meant by «traditional law». However, by the late thirteenth century, «custom» reveals a new dynamism, often superseding the archaism of inherited written statutes.

Above all, one must not be taken in by the false modernity of literacy itself. Stage-theorists of culture are still fond of positing an oral, traditional past, which is superseded by a period of writing, modernity, and openness to the present. Even Bakhtin, whose notion of dialogism has provided so much stimulus to literary analysis, fell into the trap of contrasting the epic and novelistic worlds as successive stages of cultural development. «The epic», he said, «is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located», while «the novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge, and practice (the future).»[16] So defined, orality, epic discourse, and tradition are tautologies. But the novel, which Bakhtin saw emerging in Hellenism and later in Rabelais, also reworks tradition in subtle ways. There is not one tradition and one modernity, but rather different uses of tradition adapted to linguistic and social circumstances, in which the creation of the «epic past» is an indissoluble part of the creation of the discourse of modernity.

In a world of self-conscious reflection on the past, both tradition and modernity are discourses; and, as such, they may be thought of both as realities and as forms of social disguise. They need no longer be what on the surface they seem to be. Let me give one example. No figure in the twelfth century embodies the force of tradition as does St. Bernard. He is charismatic, authoritative, and the master of the century's major means of communication, the sermon. The essence of his message is monastic reform through a revival of the Benedictine tradition; and that is one genuine element in his discourse. But, as we look closer at the saint, we see others: the rural aristocrat, who is suspicious of the town and the nascent university milieu; and, more generally, we see the older agrarian system of great estates threatened

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[16]   M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, 1981), quoting respectively p. 16 and p. 15.

by markets, cash crops, work contracts, entrepreneurs, and monetary exchange. These are among the subtexts in Bernard's discourse of tradition. Traditionality here is both a force for reformist change and also a hegemony of the past, a form of historic nostalgia for an age that is passing away. Just as Bakhtin created a traditional past for the epic, so Bernard synthesizes a heroic past for eastern, ascetic monasticism.

The example of Bernard raises another issue. This concerns the carriers of traditionalistic action. Viewed from the perspective of the twelfth century, it is not intellectuals but institutions that matter. This is one of the meanings of Bernard's victory over Abelard, which he won not as an individual alone but also as the representative of an institutional renewal. However, this was a battle, not the war. As one moves forward in time, the role of ideas grows. There is no evidence that Bernard's monks knew, or cared, about the literary debate between a Cluniac and a Cistercian[17]. But, a century later, it is doubtful that anyone joined the spiritual Franciscans without a grasp, however rudimentary, of the issues surrounding apostolic poverty. Tradition and modernity had by this time become both institutional and intellectual issues. Looking forward to the fourteenth century, we see another sort of shift. It is no longer religious groups which carry the debate. This now takes place chiefly in literature and art, whose vehicle is style. For reflections of modernity, we turn to Dante, Chaucer, and Petrarch. Clearly we must not only investigate the fact of modernity. We should also ask why we witness a transfer from institutions to ideas, literature, and art, and, if that is so, what it means. One thing it seems to mean is that revolutions can be started through forms of expression alone.

But there is also something to be learned about our attitude towards modernization. In general, we have given insufficient weight in European history to internal factors produced by reactions to tradition. We have thereby foreshortened our perspective on change itself. Among phenomena of long duration, traditionalistic action plays a significant role. True, there are disruptions: one thinks of technology, the Crusades, the Arab menace, and the shattering effects of wars, plagues, and famines. Science and economics too argue for discon-

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[17]   *Dialogus duorum Monachorum*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens, *Studi medievali*, serie terza 13 (1972), 375-470.

tinuities. But the most important long-term forces grow from within Europe's own social and cultural conventions. One of the tasks that awaits historical research is the sorting out of the long and short waves of tradition and modernity, and of the setting up of a genuinely comparative model of change in western and non-western societies based on reactions to the inherited past.

The typical and atypical features of European development can thereby be thrown into relief more precisely than before. J.C. Heesterman argues that what characterizes tradition in Indian Hinduism is an «inner conflict of atemporal order and temporal shift» rather than «resilience and adaptiveness» in society[18]. But this circularity does not adequately describe how Christian tradition works in the western Middle Ages. What is distinctive in its approach is its attempt to overcome the inner conflict of tradition, and this involves the birth of the notion of cultural progress as a way of transcending and yet incorporating the past. Modernity, as a byproduct of tradition, emerges more positively in Christianity than it does in other scriptural religions, not only in comparison with Hinduism but also in contrast to its neighbouring faiths in the West, Judaism and Islam. Christianity is not itself a modernizing faith — in essence no religion is — but during the Middle Ages it opens the door to what later becomes known as modernization. This can be viewed as an advance in civilization of a sort. But let us not be too quick to applaud. For it implied a transfer of conflict from symbolic to lived reality, and once that took place a resolution could only be brought about in terms of human lives. That is one of the unfortunate lessons of the next five centuries of European history.

Brian STOCK

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[18]   *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, 2.