

TRADITIONS, INNOVATIONS AND DISCONTINUATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE

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Contents

1. Tradition
 - 1.1 Tradition and continuity
 - 1.1.1 Tradition as thread linking past and present
 - 1.1.2 Institutions as enforcers of tradition
 - 1.2 Tradition and authority
 - 1.2.1 The way things always have been
 - 1.2.2 The role of social institutions, religious rituals, language, narratives
 2. Innovation
 - 2.1 Innovation as a break with past traditions
 - 2.1.1 Challenge by questioning, curiosity, creativity of individuals
 - 2.1.2 Contact with other cultures
 3. Discontinuities
 - 3.1 New social organization
 - 3.1.1 Transition from subsistence farming to city states
 - 3.1.2 Elements of old order are arranged in the new structure
 - 3.1.3 New classes appear
 - 3.1.4 Colonization: Loss and preservation of cultural heritage
 - 3.2 New cultural practices
 - 3.2.1 Transition from oral to written culture
 - 3.2.2 New religious beliefs: shift from poly- to monotheism
 - 3.2.3 New forms of art: architecture, painting, music, dance
 - 3.2.4 Invention of the symbolic value of money
 - 3.2.5 The management of time through calendars
 - 3.3 New way of looking at things (epistemological shifts)
 - 3.3.1 Knowledge is ordered in a new way
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

The concept of tradition is discussed from the perspectives of past and present cultures, of institutions, and authority. Innovation, as the opposite of tradition, necessarily breaks with traditions, adapting social patterns and leading to discontinuities. This in turn paves the way for new social organization, to new cultural practices. In the Foucaultian perspective this necessitates an epistemological shift and a new knowledge organization in the observer.

1. Tradition

1.1 Tradition and continuity

1.1.1 Tradition as thread linking past and present

By tradition we mean the customs and mores that inform and shape the life of a people which are passed on from parents to children almost unconsciously. They are the unspoken moral values and norms that shape our attitude towards our family and our elders as well as towards the society and state we live in. They ensure the smooth interaction between our social environment and us.

It is normally only in a time of transition, marked by far-reaching upheaval and turmoil, when the authority of these customs and mores is no longer assured that it becomes necessary to reflect on them and to record them. In this instance tradition reveals its conservative nature as it seeks to preserve and entrench a way of life that is already threatened by fundamental social, economic and political changes. In this situation the myth of a "golden age" can be used as a rallying call to a political movement that aims to escape from the new power constellation in order to restore the former status quo.

This illustrates the point that tradition is not simply a given but is redefined by each new generation, class, or nation in its quest to understand where it came from but also to legitimize its current praxis. In this way tradition is a construct that allows us to identify ourselves by setting us apart from others but also enables us to achieve certain goals. There is therefore a creative aspect to tradition that implies that if it is to remain vital and pertinent to the present generation it cannot just be imitated but must be made an integral part of the new situation. This would entail a critical rereading of the tradition and/or a deconstruction coupled with a new assemblage of its parts. The alternative would be a strict adherence to the rules laid down by a culture that would eventually lead to an exhaustion of its resources and energies.

There are examples of the latter in world history where a highly organized culture developed all of a sudden but disappeared just as abruptly again. As it seemed to have reached its highest peak of perfection from the outset it did not appear to be in further need of change or improvement. Such a culture developed in the middle of the third millennium before Christ in the two cities of Harappa in the Punjab and in Mohenjodaro in Sindh, which were situated five hundred kilometers apart from each other, but clearly formed part of the same culture. The downside of this type of cultural formation, however, is marked by a high level of rigidity, as manifested in a codified set of laws and rules, regulating every aspect of life, usually enforced by a priest-class.

1.1.2 Institutions as enforcers of tradition

The social institutions in which traditions are passed on from the older to the younger generation are the family, church, school and universities. The complexity and length of a child's education depends on the complexity and differentiation of his/her society and the rank and status s/he is able to obtain in it. So in an agrarian society revolving around village life with its clan structure, it may be sufficient to receive one's education in the family from one's elders, while in a city-based social structure with an established hierarchy and a civil service or a priest class it may be necessary to prolong the duration of education to learn reading, writing and arithmetic in order to be able to understand the fundamental texts of one's culture as well as to master the techniques of government, the arts and the sciences.

1.2 Tradition and authority

1.2.1 The way things always have been

The authority of tradition rests on the weight of the past. It is always already there when we are born into this world and we have to adapt to it in order to survive. Before we become individuated as subjects, we are subjected to it. Yet in order not to become crushed by its sheer weight we also have to reject it, or to turn it into the abject, in the words of Kristeva, and to steer our own course through it. This may entail forming an ego ideal that will determine the values according to which we will act.

1.2.2 The role of social institutions, religious rituals, language, narratives

Social institutions

Social institutions ensure the stability of a community by establishing the rules of social interaction as well as procedures for introducing changes to the political course of action. The government institutions of ancient Greece, the people's assembly and the council, whose members were elected once a year, are a good example. They replaced the old Areopagus that consisted of experienced men whose term of office expired upon their death. This, of course, gave the institution enormous gravity as well as providing an essential continuity of consultation. But when this power was substantially eroded by the withdrawal of its fiscal functions and its influence on the people's assembly, this capital was destined to lie fallow and was not able to support the weight of the whole body politic. Even its supervision of the constitution and judgment of murder cases, which it had retained, could not compensate for this loss.

Language

Foucault noted that what civilizations and peoples left behind for us as monuments of their thinking, are not so much the texts as their vocabularies and syntaxes, the sounds of their language rather than the spoken words, their speeches less than that which make them possible: the discursivity of their language. In his article on "Encyclopédie" in the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot states that the language of a people is made up of its vocabulary, and that its vocabulary bears fairly accurate testimony to all the insights of this people.

One could therefore form an idea of the progress of a people, if one were to compare only the vocabulary of a nation at different times. Every science had its name, every term in a science had its own, everything, that is known in nature is being named, just as everything one invents in the arts, the phenomena as well as the crafts and the instruments. From this insight Foucault deduces the possibility of writing a history of freedom and slavery starting from the languages or also a history of the opinions, the prejudices, the superstitions, the belief of any kind, for which the writings are always less valuable witnesses than the words themselves.

Oral Narratives and Canons

Intellectual traditions are also contained in the classical texts that form the core of academic study and that are commented on by each generation of scholars. That part of the classics that is being transmitted through the centuries can itself become the subject of heated debate as each school of interpretation seeks to adapt the tradition for its own social and political ends. In this sense scholarly commentary on a culture's sacred texts resembles more a religious exegesis than a historical-philological explanation.

This discipline of tradition also manifests itself where oral narratives are concerned. Here the main purpose is to transmit the myths, legends, genealogies and historical events and customs and mores from the older to the younger generation. Particular attention is paid to the exact memorizing of the narrative, with the slightest deviation from the formulation of the elder person being severely sanctioned. In traditional Xhosa society there are special narratives for the girls to learn from the elder women that relate to their expected behavior in the household and community as adults. Part of this learning process is the adoption of a 'feminine' voice.

The Codification of The Law

When the unspoken customs and mores that constitute the tradition can no longer be considered binding, it becomes necessary to write them down and to codify them as the law. In the times of Herodot, the law covered all aspects of life, and ranges from technical advice on agriculture and shipping to general ethical rules of behavior (marriage, family morals, treatment of servants, ethics of neighborliness) to instructions of a more ritual nature on sacrifices, cleansing, table manners, sexuality amongst others. These prescriptions, especially of the latter kind, were hardly new to his contemporaries. They coincide with received custom or experience, which could be considered common knowledge of the people. But that a poet lent such views which corresponded with customary practices an objective expression, that he thereby raised them to the status of articulated norms, that indicated in fact a significant change of consciousness and was a direct precursor to the endeavor started for the first time in the next and subsequent generations, to preserve the traditional legal notions in writing.

The most important breakthrough to a statutory order of social life in the Hellenic world came with the codification of the law. It had been a work in progress since the second half of the seventh century. Its aim was to remove the legal insecurity which accompanied the oral tradition and with it the lack of any precision. The emphasis, however, did not lie on the creation of a new law. The concern was rather to assist with

the realization of the old law. But the idea to juxtapose its pragmatic implementation through jurisdiction with a controllable institution, the text of the law, was revolutionary enough. One could now refer to the letter of the law which was accessible to all if a punishment for adultery, theft, robbery, an act of violence was needed, the code of procedure which was all too easy an object of manipulation, was fixed, and the procedure for legal transactions was laid down as far as possible. And finally, it also presented the possibility to pass binding prescriptions in an area that seemed to have been left mainly to the liberal implementation of customary law.

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Biographical Sketch

Anette Horn studied German and English Literature at the University of Cape Town. She graduated with a Ph.D. in 1998 (*Nietzsches Begriff der décadence. Kritik und Analyse der Moderne* (Heidelberger Beiträge zur Germanistik 2000)). She was co-editor of *Like a house on fire* (COSAW 1994). Essays on Anna Seghers, Nietzsche, Musil, Uwe Timm, Jürgen Fuchs and South African literature (Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, John Coetzee etc.). She has taught at the University of Cape Town and was a research associate there. She was an Alexander von Humboldt post-doctoral research fellow at the Technische Universität Berlin, and is now senior lecturer in German at the University of Pretoria.