Conceiving of tradition

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Introduction

Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, there has been a prevalence of negative attitudes to the abstract idea and to concrete particular instances of tradition. The social sciences typify a tendency to disparage or else to neglect tradition, as Edward Shils has noted (1981: 7; also Giddens 1999: 2). It is ironical that ‘tradition’ is a coinage of modernity, ‘a product of the last 200 years in Europe,’ Giddens (1999: 2) pointing out that ‘in mediaeval times there was no generic notion of tradition’ for the simple reason that ‘there was no call for such a word …because tradition and custom were everywhere.’

The term tradition is often interchanged with that of transmission, as for example when Shils (1981: 12) writes that tradition in its basic sense refers to ‘anything [tradtum] which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.’ Again, ‘the decisive criterion is that, having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination’ an object ‘is handed down from one generation to the next.’ Elsewhere, Shils (1981: 15) specifies that there must be ‘two transmissions over three generations’ before an object can be accurately described as a tradition (or the content of a tradition).

There is a problem with the notion of tradition such as one finds it presented by Shils, a problem on which Max Radin (1937: 62) put his finger when he wrote that ‘If the term tradition were understood in its literal sense of transmission, all elements of social life would be traditional, except’ for a handful of ‘novelties …and …immediate borrowings.’ The inclusiveness of Shils’ category of tradition is evident when he lists among its instances (Shils 1981: 12) ‘material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions’ as well as ‘buildings, monuments, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, books, tools, machines.’ All, indeed, that Shils’ conception of tradition (1981: 12) excludes are the relatively few things that have been lately created along with those phenomena that are entirely due to ‘physical processes in the external world …[and] of ecological and physiological necessity.’ Shils’ class of traditional social and cultural objects is heavily populated.

One can infer that the literal conception of tradition is unlikely to be of much use in inquiry, and that a notion of tradition, to be serviceable, needs to be delimited to a subset(s) of transmitted social and cultural products. How is the delimitation to be effected?
Narrowing the subject

The problem I am posing might be dismissed as spurious by supporters of the theory of contemporary society as detraditionalized (Beck 1992: 153; Giddens 1994). Writes Giddens (1999: 4): ‘under the impact of globalisation’ Western societies are being ‘opened up from the hold of tradition’ while other societies ‘that remained more traditional are becoming detraditionalised.’ Otherwise, as I see it, there are two main ways in which sociologists might approach the problem to which I have drawn attention so as to make the subject of tradition more amenable to investigation. Radin ignores the literal sense of tradition and defines the word more narrowly. Shils does not meet the problem head-on but assumes that certain traditions are socially more important and more deserving of sociological study than are others.

According to Radin (1937: 62), ‘only some of the inherited or transmitted customs, institutions, speech, dress, laws, songs and tales are traditions’. (As further examples of tradition Radin cites (1937: 64) art techniques, costumery, gestures, cuisines, understandings of history and ideas of human traits as underlying national unity and nationalism, systems of ideas, religious doctrines, institutions.) Radin suggests (1937: 66) that a transmitted social or cultural object is only a tradition when it is actively taken up as for example in a process of deliberate imitation (in contrast to being passively received through inertia or superstitious fear), and when – motivating such active adoption - the content of the tradition is judged as valuable. (A distinction that is not dissimilar to Radin’s is drawn by Oakeshott (1991: 15) between imparting/acquiring (of ‘practical knowledge’ which he characterizes as unformulated, existing only in the practice of traditions, and as acquired ‘by apprenticeship to a master’) and teaching/learning (of ‘technical knowledge’ which is explicit and only able to ‘be learned from a book) as two main types of transmission.) There are customs, for example, that Radin (1937: 62, 66) sees as satisfying neither part of his criterion, persisting inertially (being assimilated and then enacted unthinkingly). (Radin’s implication that certain customs may be traditions would be disputed by a Giddens (1999: 3; Hobsbawm 1984: 2) who describes custom as the ‘more diffuse cousin’ of tradition. For Giddens, ‘ritual and repetition’ form ‘the key defining feature of tradition’ and he regards traditions as group properties. In Giddens’ view (1999: 3) the distinctiveness of tradition consists in the fact ‘that it defines a kind of truth,’ the follower of ‘a traditional practice’ not having to inquire as to alternatives, tradition providing her with ‘a framework for action that can go largely unquestioned.’) Radin (1937: 63) lays particular emphasis on the valuation criterion of traditions: ‘Strictly and properly speaking therefore, a tradition is not a mere observed fact like an existing custom, nor a story that exhausts its significance in being told; it is an idea which expresses a value judgment. A certain way of acting is regarded as right; a certain order or arrangement is held desirable. The maintenance of the tradition is the assertion of this judgment’, the judgment forming a spring of, and being embodied in, conduct. In essence a tradition is a transmitted judgment that some social object is possessed of value (Radin 1937: 64).

Radin (1937: 63 emphasis added) considers the world’s major religions to exemplify an important type of tradition, consisting in highly valued transmissions (a concrete divinely
authored ‘sacred scripture’ and doctrinal accretions) that are handed ‘over for safe keeping as a deposit’ to an exclusive sacerdotal group. The traditional element is handed to a particular person or to an exclusive group that has been carefully chosen as ‘worthy of confidence’. In traditions of this type – further examples as cited by Radin (1937: 63, 64) include ‘the legal aspects of the Roman law depositum’ and the ‘standards of correct speech’ among certain language groups - the recipient is under a moral obligation to preserve the deposit in an unaltered state.

The proposition being contended for in the present paper is that tradition is an unhelpfully vague notion when, as in the writings of a Shils, it is taken to include virtually all social and cultural transmissions. We contend here that the class of transmissions is broader than is that of traditions, having traditions as a subtype. Another distinction that tends to be collapsed in the literature is that between traditions and the traditional: objects described as traditional – societies, organizations, freedoms, constraints, thought, laws, societies, manners, customs, approaches to design (gardens, buildings), cures for disease, ‘traditional narratives’ as discussed by post-modernists (Rosenau 1992: 85) – are not of themselves traditions. By way of illustration, a person might adopt a traditional design for her garden after studying sketches in old books. The design has been neglected for centuries. The design is, in this instance, traditional but there is no tradition of such design. Similarly there are numerous cases in the history of science of traditional ideas that have been long neglected being taken up and inspiring new research (Feyerabend 1978: 101-105). Again, the repeated selling and buying of an antique object over many generations can be counted as a form of transmission of a traditional object, but the transmission-and-object do not themselves constitute a tradition. Monuments and buildings typically persist over generations, but that is not to say they satisfy Radin’s criterion of a tradition which includes the idea of active adoption, for buildings may consist as part of a taken-for-granted fabric of society. The class of traditions (complexes of mutually interacting vocabularies, doctrines, practices, rules, values) overlaps that of traditional objects (historical objects), but it is important that the distinction be respected as a condition of thinking clearly about tradition.

Radin’s account of tradition is unsatisfactory on at least two counts. First, Radin’s paradigms of tradition – static religious traditions – are not characteristic of secularized modernity whose traditions are as a rule dynamic. Second, Radin is mistaken in suggesting that the distinction between active acceptance and passive reception is a part of the grounds on which to draw the tradition/non-tradition distinction. Traditions may (and perhaps invariably do) involve both these modes of transmission: inculcation and learning by rote on the one hand and imitation and other forms of active learning on the other. The processes are complementary: a good many commentators might associate textbooks with the inculcation and passive reception of a body of knowledge, but it is found on close examination (as for example by Kuhn (1977: 306-307)) that textbook exercises call for intelligent participation (problem solving). Oral traditions, Micronesian navigational knowledge being a case in point, may appear to be transmissions involving passive reception, the function of transmission being to preserve a complex system of knowledge on which the lives of mariners and island communities depend. Anthropologists, however, have shown that in the oral transmission of Micronesian
navigational knowledge recitation and rote combine with active analysis and problem solving (Worsley 1997: 134, 142). The assimilation of religious traditions by children from an early age may require that they actively understand ideas and imitate practices, but it just as surely requires that they passively learn texts by rote which, of course, is why rationalists criticize religious teaching as dogmatic.

Science

Traditional objects are not ipso facto traditions. Traditions may involve passive reception as well as active imitation. The relative proportions of the passive and the active are likely to vary between traditions.

Science deserves our attention as a (the?) major tradition of modernity. It is a tradition about which, as a matter of interest, supporters of the detradditionalization thesis have said very little (there is mention of it on only 5 of the more than 300 pages of Heelas, et al., 1996). The following discussion draws from the writings of Michael Polanyi who appears to have been the first scholar to recognize that tradition is an essential part of science, and who almost certainly was the first scholar to systematically analyze the content and function of the tradition of science.

Polanyi draws a sharp distinction between the acquisition of scientific knowledge up to the completion of the undergraduate degree and the training that PhD students receive for research. For Polanyi there are transmissions of cultural products (theories and other forms of substantive knowledge, vocabulary, knowledge of how to use instruments, and models, methods and understandings such as enable students to solve textbook-problems (Kuhn’s paradigms-as-exemplars)). The other main type of transmission that Polanyi identifies in science consists in fostered abilities and skills for generating new products (insights as to which problems are live, where to look for discoveries, whether to disregard experimental anomalies). Polanyi suggests that generative transmissions from experts to neophytes, followed by the successful use of the mechanisms to generate new objects of value and the subsequent transmission of the skills of cultural generation to later generations, are characteristic of science and of other major creative cultural traditions of modernity. To products of the mechanisms of generation Polanyi (1958: 207) is apt to apply the different label of lore or heritage. In each type of transmission, Polanyi suggests there are moments of passive reception and others of activity for students, but active imitation assumes greater importance in traditions as the processes of cultural generation are acquired by emulating the work of recognized craftsmen. Polanyi (1958: 53) gives a greater emphasis to the role of tacit knowledge in generative traditions than he does in lores. Characteristically in Polanyian traditions, method-rules, judgments, and creativity in problem solving are unformulated and embodied as personal intuitive knowledge.

Polanyi’s two kinds of transmissions are related to each other in several ways. A generative tradition can only be transmitted to those who have learned the corresponding lore of products, providing the generative tradition with its vocabulary, concepts, point of departure, and presuppositional worldview (Polanyi 1946: 57, 64, 83). Learning a
Polanyian lore is similar to learning a language. O’Hear writes in another context (1988: 6) that to learn a language is ‘to learn it as a practice’ so that it ‘will initially be instilled in us and accepted by us on its own terms’ rather than be adopted as an ‘explicit theory [that] we might consider and form an opinion about.’ To learn a language is to assimilate the ‘values and perceptions embodied in its concepts and classifications.’ In short, an agent has to immerse ‘himself in the practice and interest of pre-existing culture.’ Each generative tradition will have to make additions to a corresponding lore of products otherwise agents in a generative tradition would come to reject it as sterile. A lore of products will have had a genesis, although not necessarily in the form of a generative tradition existing through time (a lore of products might be assembled from eclectic sources). But as a rule, when a lore of products is being added to, the additions will occur from a corresponding generative tradition. A lore of products can endure without a corresponding generative tradition which may have atrophied or else, as we have just suggested, may never have existed. (Oral traditions, as for example the ballads that Homer collected together to form his epic poems, and the navigational knowledge of Micronesia, are lores of products without corresponding coexisting generative traditions. While static, these lores are exceedingly complex, and are acquired in the course of a long training that fosters skillfulness to a high degree (Gladwin 1970: 220, 225). Polanyi is surely correct, however, in thinking that the cultural traditions that characterize modernity are ‘dynamic’ ones, while oral lores exist in pre-modern societies. Polanyian dynamic traditions contrast against static lores such as the world’s major religions, for their sacred scriptures are, as Radin notes, deposits that are entrusted to carefully selected guardians for preservation. Hermeneutic activity may exist alongside scriptures, its agents aiming to validly interpret texts. Possessing a certain dynamism (understandings of meaning alter), these hermeneutic activities may be located on a continuum between dynamic traditions and static lores (Connerton 1989: 95ff.). (In several respects Polanyi’s idea of tradition foreshadows that of Alasdair MacIntyre, but there is a difference in that MacIntyre’s traditions are not peculiar to modernity, examples having existed throughout history, whereas dynamic traditions –dynamic traditions as against static lores – are, for Polanyi, a peculiar feature of modernity.)

Afterword

It has become a commonplace that traditions are deliberate inventions. This view is expressed in the title and in the text of the Hobsbawm-Ranger anthology (Hobsbawm 1981: 1; Connerton 1989: 51-52). Giddens (1999: 3) claims that all traditions have been invented (‘consciously constructed’), implying that forethought, design and ‘reason’ have gone into their planning and creation and that these continue to play a part in the ongoing recreation of traditions. Langlois (2001: 15829) writes that sociologists nowadays look on ‘tradition as an invented reference developed by societies in function of the demands of the present (Hobsbawm)’. Leaving aside the question of what exactly Langlois might mean by describing society as an ‘inventor’, it is the case that while certain elements of a tradition may be invented (e.g. theologies, scientific theories), other elements may be chanced upon inadvertently (accidental discoveries), with others existing objectively, for example as side-effects or as unintended consequences (the test-implications of theories, the facts that are relevant to theories) (see O’Hear 1988, 134-5).
References

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