

ETHNOLOGY'S HOT NOTION?

A Discussion Forum on How to Return to “Tradition” Today

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After the publication of Hobsbawm and Ranger's groundbreaking *The Invention of Tradition* and ten years after Noyes' essay, *Tradition: Three Traditions*, what do we, as specialists of European cultures, have to say about “tradition”? This forum invites a selection of scholars coming from various thematic fields and countries to think about the concept of tradition, considered as one of our first conceptual tools and ethnographic objects of investigation. The authors reflexively discuss in which ways their research experiences challenge their own perceptions, understanding, and reframing of tradition. More than mapping new and allegedly new – or better “recycled” – ways in which social, ethnic, religious, or political groups use and manipulate traditions, the authors also address their perplexities with the notion of tradition. They thus add a specific layer of reflection, touching on temporality, methodology, and theoretical frames, to their practices of folklore and ethnology today.

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In 2009, Dorothy Noyes published an influential essay, *Tradition: Three Traditions*, on the destiny of the notion of “tradition” in European folkloristic, ethnological, and anthropological studies. Being a Western scientific category as well as a concept embodied and active within social groups, tradition can be thought of as: 1) the very process of cultural transmission – tradition is *how* transmission happens; 2) a tool to better grasp temporality – modernity or progression is what comes up against tradition; or 3) an asset of properties, habitus and/or goods, of a specific group – tradition is *what* is transmitted. However, Noyes argues that there is a fourth way to understand “tradition”: as in Roman society, givers

of cultural goods and aptitudes transfer not only authority or property, but also responsibility to the receiver. This fourth definition of tradition leads us to associate the process of transmission with a moral connotation. It opens up the path to political assessments and critical engagement with cultural heritage administrations, for example, as well as with our own intellectual uses of “tradition”.

Many years after the publication of Hobsbawm & Ranger's ground-breaking *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) and ten years after Noyes' essay, what do we, as specialists of European cultures, have to say about “tradition”? In this special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea*, we have chosen to discuss tradition once

Fabio Mugnaini

Tradition – Weaving the Social

As the teacher of a course officially labelled *Storia delle tradizioni popolari*, that is history of popular traditions, I am used to opening the lectures cycle with a disclaimer: my students are told not to expect a historicist formation, nor to receive a set of tools for detecting or “unmasking the folk”, nor to think of traditions as a matter of fact to collect as if they were mushrooms, seashells, gemstones, novels or selfies.

For Alberto M. Cirese, the anthropologist who, in the 1960s, borrowed from Gramsci the fundamental inspiration for reformulating folklore studies in Italy (Cirese 1971), the term “tradition” referred both to the process of intergenerational cultural transmission within a well-defined social group (inculturation) and to the product of such process, that is all the contents that could be best transmitted through the means administered by that same social group.

The path carved out by various transmission processes (orality, emulation, reproduction) and contents (storytelling, handcrafts, foods), running parallel the social division of multilayered societies (peasants vs. landowners, rural vs. town dwellers), mirroring also the political order, have crossed, melded, and faded across the decades. Firstly, within the national horizons, such as those evoked by Hermann Bausinger (1990); secondly, under the pressure of globalizing forces such as the post-war and post-1968 modernization, the rise and sunset of the global revolution dream, the promises and cheats of the global market and the allure of consumerism; finally, today’s revitalization of local identities, together with the passionate return to identitarian policies. This has given new sap to the old discourse, sometimes replete with mystical or nostalgic stuff, as in the case of “Tradition”, with a capital T, which the neo-fascist movements often herald to propagandize their attempt to revive dead ideologies of death.

Therefore, tradition cannot be thought of as a clear-cut channel of cultural transmission, full of given contents, located somewhere in the past and rolling off into our present. Tradition is not float-

ing as a sheltering past over the heads of its bearers. Considered as regards the relation with the past, tradition is the result of a continuous and processual choice: Lenclud’s short essay said it clearly (Lenclud 2001); its meanings may either confirm or even radically change those of the “quoted” past; traditions live everywhere in social spaces, though variously legitimized or criticized according to the legitimating force of its actors. Out of the monopole of history, tradition appears as a creative frame: anything that is made twice – a twice-behaved behaviour, as Richard Schechner defined performance (Schechner 2004) – might be felt, from inside, or read, from outside, as a tradition. If the performed event is in its umpteenth iteration, tradition will rely on its past; if it is just the second time, its makers will be hoping or working for its future. Either as “mark of modernity” or as performative product, tradition today appears to be a “metacultural production”, becoming then almost synonymous with “heritage” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004).

The new perspective on tradition that comes along with the “heritage turn”, in Italy coincided with Palumbo’s seminal research in Sicily, a long enduring ethnography on tradition making, heritage policies, political conflicts, inspired by a prescient attention to legacies of nationalism, in the wake of, among others, Herzfeld and Handler (Palumbo 2003).

The nation, after having coevolved with the celebration (and the nationalization) of folk culture, seemed to sink under the weight of international class conflicts, or under the affirmation of a universal market of cultural goods. Slowly, but relentlessly, the nation has resurfaced again, within – and probably even against – the international rhetoric of Unesco’s logics and practices.

The worldwide “unescoization” (to borrow Berliner’s coined term) (Berliner 2012) of traditions constitutes nowadays the paradigm, which rules also the promotion of local customs. It seems that something that has existed for decades suddenly feels the urge to rewrite itself according to the heritage model and mould, as also Noyes already noticed (Noyes 2009: 246). Behaving, doing or being something in

some particular way, no matter how ancient, singular or necessary, seems, somehow, incomplete if it is not certified as traditional, and hence as worthy of attention.

Traditional behaviours or creations still continue to select their track from the past, to borrow meanings and alibis, but in the era of certified cultural heritage they need to be accredited; they need birth certificates to be issued by experts, institutions, academics: bearers, ministers and rentiers of a new bureaucratic order.

In the Heritage era, the prevailing concept of traditions seems to be that of the “least common multiple” (or LCM), the encompassing quantitative concept that include different traits, or events or places; LCM circumscribes pertinences and closes differences into normative and authoritative categories so to blare and proclaim tradition. Traditions carefully described and itemized piled up for the national pride, imply also the worrying return to the nationalist claim of national Tradition. There is room, however, for trying to resist and defend an alternative view of tradition, driven by the complementary figure of the “highest common factor” (or HCF), that is the shared substance made of languages, values, expressive forms, social claims, crafts or skills, on which free and fluctuating identities are built; focusing on the HCF makes possible to valorize various ways of conjugating our humanity. According to LCM the pizza tradition is a possession of Italy as one of Unesco’s fiefs; according to HCF it should be included in a wider array of clever and skilled techniques of sorting out tasty food from poor resources: widespread, socially precious, ecologically pressing, though still neglected.

For us, as scholars, there is the choice between cooperating with the hegemonic management of traditions (legitimizing governmental control on national heritage, producing items for the tourism market, leading cultural diversity to the expected political uniformity) and trying to challenge such an apparently irresistible trend. It is up to us, as experts, or simply as academic and state teachers, to keep alive a critical gaze, so as to be able to point to the main functions of tradition: that of supporting the

process nature of human history; knitting together times, places, generations; building citizenship and including incoming friends and faces in the ongoing construction of our societies.

We can work on the tradition as a connective concept, framing a matrix of possible links between facts, judgements, and actions that are distant, both in time and in space or in their meaning and value. Traditional links may be seen in horizontal, spatial or social solidarity. Such links may actively unite apparently diverging destinies, such as those of the people who land on our beaches: their hopes should remind us – and we should make this explicit – the many stories recounted by our own migrant diaspora, in order to build, upon this shared destiny, a possible newer citizenship and a better future.

Seen under the lens of tradition as a connective or relational concept, single events get a new life, absorb and radiate a different meaning. The attribute “traditional” gives to a certain event a peculiar status, a particular impact force and appeal. Tradition as highest common factor may become strategic for weaving the social texture, for revitalizing productive citizenships and ensuring a future beyond the individual solitude within the walls of neo-nationalist pride or the malls of global consumptions.

Ellen Hertz

Democracy and Tradition, Democracy as Tradition

Writing about tradition from Switzerland presents a useful occasion for thinking about the relation between heritage and democratic politics. With respect to the latter, Switzerland has long portrayed itself as both a model and an exception: a spontaneous birthplace of local democracy, it has served as an inspiration for other countries while remaining politically neutral, an outsider to international alliances and multinational institutions (Eberle & Imhof 2007). This particularity has gone hand-in-hand with another, of great interest to scholars of tradition. Switzerland can claim to be the first state to be ideationally stitched together not by notions of race, nation or empire, but through intangible cultural heritage, the famous *Sitten, Bräuche und Traditionen* (manners, customs and traditions) that have nourished