

TRADITION IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT DISCOURSE AND THE CONSERVATIVE CRITIQUE

Sunday Olaoluwa Dada
Department of Philosophy
Ekiti State University, Nigeria

Tradition has been disparaged as a conceptual category that should be jettisoned in the development process. It is thought to be capable of hindering the use of reason which is thought to be the primary mover of development. This thinking has its root in the Enlightenment rationalisations, especially as championed by the philosophes, Rene Descartes, and Immanuel Kant. Conservatives, such as Edmund Burke, contrarily, are of the opinion that tradition is a valuable resource for society because they regard tradition as the accumulated wisdom of the past. This paper argues that, even though the Enlightenment and conservative thinkers differ in their conceptions of the value of tradition, they misconceived what tradition entails because they failed to pay attention to its dynamics and consequently could not put its values in proper focus. The paper considers tradition as a relevant imperative in development attempts and, therefore, suggests a conception of tradition that makes it a dynamic and useful phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of tradition has been in disrepute since the seventeenth century. This is consequent upon the rationalizations about the nature and functions of tradition by the Enlightenment thinkers. Tradition was regarded as the cause or consequences of ignorance, superstition, clerical dominance, religious intolerance, social hierarchy, unequal wealth distribution, and other states of mind and social institutions which were not approved by rationalism and progressivism. It was thought that when tradition yields to reason and scientific knowledge, all vices associated with it would fall away. Put differently, tradition was depicted as the opposite of reason and freedom. It should be noted that while one fully acknowledges the historical significance of the Enlightenment and its critique of tradition, one cannot but point out that by setting tradition in opposition to reason and freedom, the Enlightenment fails to capture the meaning and essence of tradition. The bad label put on tradition and the disrepute brought to it has continued to influence most thinkers today.

Conservatism, on the other hand, rather thinks that tradition is valuable and should be taken into consideration in society and so, the defence of tradition has been a recurring theme in the conservative circles, especially in the political thought of Edmund Burke. Tradition is regarded as accumulated wisdom of the past which is impossible for any society to jettison. However, it is thought to be a phenomenon which is static and residual.

My argument in this paper is that both the Enlightenment thinkers and the conservatives grossly misconceive what tradition entails because they failed to pay attention to its dynamics. Despite the fact that Burke critiqued the Enlightenment idea of tradition, he ended up using the same understanding of the concept as the Enlightenment thinkers do. The catch, which this paper will elucidate, is that the idea of tradition in both the Conservative and the Enlightenment frameworks cannot play any significant role in the development process. Tradition, in other words, can only inject positively in the development process when its conceptual boundaries and dynamics are properly unravelled. This essay therefore suggests a conception of tradition that makes it a dynamic and useful phenomenon.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section appraises the Enlightenment critique of the idea of tradition. In the second section, we take a look at the conservative critique of tradition with the hope of showing that though conservatives such as Burke are right in drawing our attention to the mistake of the Enlightenment, we need to see tradition beyond the Burkean framework. In the third and final section the paper argues that tradition is ontological to human beings and thus indispensable to their existence.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT CONCEPTION OF TRADITION

The Enlightenment has traditionally been associated with the birth of modernity. Many influential men and women, mostly philosophers, of the eighteenth century condemned the superstition of religion, the arbitrariness of absolutism, the inhumanity of some institutions, and the doctrinaire character of classical philosophy. Their critiques appear to have initiated a universal project of creating secular, constitutional, humane, and open societies where reason reigns supreme. This project is the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment can be understood in three senses. Firstly, it is generally used to designate a historical period defined by various projects in European history stretching from the 1680s to the close of the eighteenth century. Secondly, it is used to refer to a process, a set of activities, in which individuals engaged. These activities were viewed as involving the application of philosophy to a range of concerns relating to man in the society. Thirdly, it is used to refer to an intellectual movement which is described as being the use of rationality to establish an authoritative ethics, aesthetics, politics, and knowledge.

The Enlightenment, as an intellectual movement, is principally identified with a group of French philosophers, *the philosophes*, who along with a few curious foreign visitors, gathered in Paris in the middle of the decades of the eighteenth century to talk and write on ways of improving the world and the lot of humanity (Robertson 2005, 2). One of the things that characterised the *philosophes* was their critical spirit. The subject matter of their discussions were many and varied. However, they shared and expounded a common set of intellectual values prominent among which were reason, humanity,

liberty, and tolerance. The *philosophes* encouraged revolution in moral, cultural, and political spheres of society and argued that society needed fundamental reorganisation. We must note, however, as Jonathan Israel (2006, 31) remarks, that they took revolution to mean any great fundamental, especially but not necessarily, positive change in the basic thinking and institution of humanity.

This movement of ideas was and is still regarded as having laid the intellectual foundation of the modern world and of modernity. By its confidence in the power of human reason, its commitment to individual freedom of expression against clerical or royal tyranny and its optimistic assumption that these were the values that would improve the human condition, the Enlightenment was believed to have inspired and justified the nineteenth-century achievements in industrialisation, liberalism, and democracy.

But there is a darker side to this movement. This is that the Enlightenment fostered the ideal of rationalism, universalism, and human perfectibility, to which, according to Peter Gay (1996, 7), could be traced the modern world's evils. For instance, Gay notes that the violence of the French Revolution, the brutality of the Nazi genocide, Western imperialism, and Soviet communism all had their intellectual origins in the Enlightenment. It, therefore, became pertinent to reengage the Enlightenment as a project with misguided elements because of its attempt to establish a single, universal, and rational standard of morality and politics. Against it, postmodernists argue that different cultures should be left to determine their own ends without any attempt to discriminate morally or politically among them.

Another reason why the Enlightenment came under attack is its poor conception and repudiation of authority and tradition. The Enlightenment thought has always been set in opposition to any orientation towards the world which is based on tradition. Whether understood as a historically designating movement in thought, or as a concept delineating a process or a trend in the development of the history of civilisation, the Enlightenment has always been linked with the idea of overcoming tradition by means of a rational insight (Honneth 1987, 692). The Enlightenment claims to liberate the thinker from the spell of handed-down traditions by subjecting to rational, universal, and reconstructable examinations all that had previously been valid solely by being socially binding. According to Honneth (1987, 693),

What is unique to the Enlightenment is its immanent relation to a criterion of rational validity which act as a standard against which opinions and convictions can be upheld by rational examination.

Chris Tame (1977, 217) also characterises it as an age that witnessed the creation of a self-conscious and revolutionary radicalism and a vision of human potentialities and the possibilities of their liberation. It was a period that attempted to objectify the basic values of supremacy, philosophy, and the autonomy of man. The autonomy of the individual is believed to rest on the supremacy and the exercise of militant rationalism which pushes aside the pretensions of illegitimate authority and the mystique of *status quo* (Tame, 1977, 219). This revolutionary significance of an unbridled rationalism was indicated most vividly by Diderot's (see Tame 1977, 219) ideal of the philosopher who "tramples underfoot prejudice, tradition, antiquity, universal assent, authority, in a word,

everything that over awes the mass of minds who dares to think....” The political temper and tendency of the Enlightenment is thus fundamentally libertarian. And this philosophical temper is most obvious in Immanuel Kant’s (1784, 1) conception of the Enlightenment:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without guidance of another. The motto of the Enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere Aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding.

The motto of the Enlightenment—*Have courage to use your own understanding*—focuses on one of the most significant themes and projects of the Enlightenment: the use of reason and the critique of authority and tradition. Kant characterises immaturity as a certain state of humanity that makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for. The Enlightenment is therefore an exit, a way out of the subversion of human reason. What is definitive of this is the freedom to think for one’s self; a freedom which requires liberating oneself from prejudice and superstition, as well as making reason self-legislative, critical, and the final arbiter in matters of conflict. Guidance in the form of the church, state, or tradition may, according to his view, prevent the human subject from exercising their reason or intellectual freedom.

It should, however, be noted that the dominance of reason in the Enlightenment does not presuppose that it was absent in the history of philosophy itself. Rather, what we have in the Enlightenment was a deep accentuation of reason over unreason. Before the Enlightenment, reason plays a very significant role in the unfolding of philosophy itself, beginning in the ancient period, even through the medieval philosophy’s emphasis on religion.

In Greece, in the ancient period, there was a shift from mythological stories of the gods to explain the operations of the world and of the self when some of the Greeks (philosophers) began to discover new ways of explaining these phenomena. Instead of reading their ideas into, or out of, ancient scriptures or poems, they began to use reason, contemplation, and sensory observation to make sense of reality.

In Book IV of *The republic*, Plato (2005) argues that the human soul has three distinct parts—namely, reason, spirit, and appetite—that correspond to the three groups of people in an Ideal City (guardians, soldiers, and those who provide goods and services). He then maintains that in the way justice in the society is a matter of each group of people playing the role to which it is naturally suited, so too justice in the individual is a matter of each part of the individual playing the role to which it is naturally suited. The upshot is that a person is just if, but only if, he/she is ruled by reason. As Plato conceives of reason, a person being ruled by reason is a matter of his/her choices being determined by what he or she judges to be worth doing under the circumstances. The difference between a person who is genuinely just and a person who merely acts in a just way is found in why she does what she does. His reason on what is best in the circumstances should prevail in the affairs of any rational man.

The same emphasis on reason is also found in the works of Aristotle. For instance, the development of “practical syllogism” in ethics as found in the *Nicomachean ethics* is an attempt to give primacy to reason over other ways of acquiring knowledge. In fact, like Socrates before him, Aristotle (2004) questions traditional beliefs in order to give prominence to reason.

However, this flame of independent and creative philosophical reflection and the emphasis on reason which had burned so brightly in ancient Greece seemed to be extinguished in the medieval age until it was revived in the Renaissance and rose in splendour in the seventeenth century. Consequently, it may be appropriate to say that what we have in the Enlightenment is the revival of reason but this time with a deeper call for individual autonomy.

Given the Enlightenment period’s rational onslaught, tradition came into disrepute as a negative category. It was seen as a dead weight that hinders originality, innovation, progress and the proper use of reason. Edward Shils (1981, 6), commenting on the disrepute brought on traditions by the Enlightenment thinkers, writes:

Traditionality became associated with a particular kind of society and culture. Traditionality was regarded as the cause of ignorance, superstition, clerical dominance, religious intolerance, social hierarchy, inequality of distribution of wealth, pre-emption of the best position in society on grounds of birth and other states of mind and social institutions which were the objects of rationalistic and progressive censure. Traditionality became the ubiquitous enemy to every *ancien regime*, it was thought that when traditionality yielded place to reason and to scientific knowledge, all the vices which it sustained would fall.

Traditionality is to be defined as following traditions or established social practise of a particular community. In this context, the Enlightenment thought opposed tradition to reason and freedom; tradition and traditionality supposedly obscure the true nature of things. Thinkers of the Enlightenment, therefore, set for themselves the task of enlightening what had, up to their time, remained in darkness. Their chief tool was human reason.

It is pertinent to note that human beings, as members of civilised societies, individually and collectively, are inheritors or recipients of a legacy of vast and complex cultural heritage in which a great variety of strands—scientific, technological, religious, moral, political, artistic, and so on—are interwoven. There is no doubt about the fact that we are inextricably implicated in the dynamics of this vast and complex cultural heritage to the extent that we cannot fully understand ourselves and function effectively in our social relationships without its help. This cultural heritage refers to some shared values which ensure cultural continuity, understanding, and communitarian ethics. But what we see in Kant’s characterisation of the Enlightenment is something that is individualistic and which challenges the individual to dare to be different. This kind of thinking finds antecedent in Cartesianism.

Cartesianism, which has its origin in the philosophy of Rene Descartes, is one of the philosophical traditions that set reason in opposition to tradition. One of the pillars of Cartesianism is the doctrine that the ultimate test of certainty is to be found in

individual consciousness. It offers a criterion of truth which places the knowing individual at the centre of the epistemological scene. For that individual, what is true is what s/he is distinctly and clearly convinced of as true. This makes the individual the absolute judge of what is right. Descartes (1985) believes that the capacity of judging well and knowing what is true or false is a function of what he calls “natural light of reason.” It is not acquired or passed on to us through cultural channels. For him also, finding truth implies essentially divesting oneself of all one’s knowledge, prejudices, and ways of thinking and to proceed through pure reasoning to seek one’s answers. He argues, however, that if a human being were to divest himself/herself of all his/her thought, he yet could not deny that he was thinking, hence, his/her *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes goes on to demonstrate, at least to his own satisfaction, that the thinker, starting from the inescapable fact of his/her thought alone, could arrive at a rational understanding of his/her problems and by extension social and political problems. Descartes, and those who develop this line of thought along strict lines, unwittingly commit to an extreme individualistic conception of the rational man. Frederick Will (1983, 94) comments that:

Rationality, as it is expressed more or less well in various human life and thoughts, is on this view the product of an identical resource residing in individuals. The realization of this character in life and thought may be encouraged or discouraged by relations between individuals, by practice and institutions that are social. But it is a character that arises in individuals, a character that in a primary and fundamental way is a character of individuals.

Given this summation, therefore, tradition and the social practices of the community do not have any role in determining what is true and what is rational. Let us suppose that we begin with the reason of the individual, can we say that the reason of individuals in the community, which has accumulated over the years, is irrelevant for individuals in determining what is rational right or moral?

In the Cartesian view, the sanctioning authority in interpersonal relations and what is to be acceptable within the society is not tradition, or “the collected reason of ages,” but what is agreeable to individual reason. So any proposed norm would be rational and thus qualify for acceptance to the extent to which it receives the sanction of reason. The question that should arise at this point is the question whether coordination and the acceptance of norms in the community can be accounted for on this extremely individualistic conception of reason. This question cannot be answered in the affirmative. This is evident even in Descartes’s own reflection when he addresses the topic of the guidelines that need to be followed and the warnings that need to be heeded by one who is setting out to conduct reason rightly and seek truth in science.

Having summarised the method in the familiar “clear and distinct ideas” by means of intuition and deduction—two fundamental elements of mathematical knowledge—Descartes has to deal with the danger of individuals mistaking ideas that are confused or unclear for those which are clear and distinct. Among the methodological guidelines which Descartes (2003) propose to reduce this damage include:

1. The employment of systematic doubt to counter the effects of parents, teachers, hearsay examples, and *tradition*;

2. The reduction of complex matter to their simple elements; and
3. The beginning of the quest for intuition with the simple element.

The problem, however, is this: How could an innocent mind which has not been trained in the act of reaching genuine intuitions be able to reach it without guidance? Or can we suppose that an intellectually immature mind can lead us? Or can the little intellectual mind be conceived to have the analytic acuteness and subtlety required to make a kind of distinction and ideas that are only apparently so? Or how could the untrained intellectual know complexes, components, and simples without reference to the tradition in his area of inquiry? This raises the possibility of reference to an existing framework that would serve as a guide to him. Such a framework is tradition-constitutive.

Apart from this, a critical look at Descartes himself will reveal that he was not radical enough in his doubt and rejection of tradition. For instance, he takes for granted the supposition that there is a truth which can be sought and that language can express it. He never doubts the ability of language to articulate reality. His acceptance of language as a means of articulation of what one knows shows the impossibility of rejecting everything that was formally received in an attempt to think rationally.

What this suggests is that an extreme individualist conception of reason, as we find in Kant and Descartes, is inadequate. The reason, as Frederick Will (1983, 97) rightly contends is that,

The actions that a pure and attentive mind needs to be able to perform in this philosophy are ones of considerable subtlety and complexity, ones that require a mind carefully critical and highly disciplined. And it could not succeed in taking care and adhering to discipline solely in the basis of innate reason. These would require the kind of development, tempering refinement, constant exercise and monitoring that logically implies a background of social practice that extend through time and is accessible to individuals through tradition.

At any point in the individual's exercise of reason, the appeal to the native endowment of reason needs to be supplemented by other resources which are capable of rendering critical judgement in this domain, and one that is patently accessible to the recipient of such legacies. The contribution of our natural endowment to the constitution of reason can therefore not be isolated from the contribution of individual experience, practice, and tradition. In such a case we can say that tradition is not opposed to reason but a necessary component of it. The store of ideas which we are counselled to disregard actually can help in the exercise of our reason.

It may also be argued that the ubiquity of tradition and its compatibility with reason resonate in the fact of the inability of any single individual to thoroughly apply the process of reasoning and verification to all constatives (Gripaldo 2011) that command his/her attention. To doubt all things in the Cartesian fashion until they can be demonstrated is impossible both practically and theoretically. This can, with some reasonableness, be said to be impossible practically. The reason is that we cannot postpone the business of living until we have reasoned out everything. It is impossible theoretically because there cannot be any significant doubt except on the basis of some

knowledge that has been accepted. To doubt any proposition, or to question whether it is true, involves not only a knowledge of its meaning, but also of some knowledge of what conditions are necessary to remove our doubt. In actual fact, we all usually do begin with a body of tradition or generally accepted beliefs. For, it does not and cannot occur to us to doubt any proposition unless we see some conflict between it and some of our other accepted beliefs. And when such conflict is perceived within the body of tradition, the appeal to reason has already manifested itself. Rather than see reason and tradition as oppositional and conflictual, we should recognise them as two great resources for humanity in an attempt to organise themselves in society. However, we argue in the next section that we cannot arrive at this dynamics of the relationship between reason and tradition by toeing the other extreme end of conservatism and its uncritical veneration of tradition.

CONSERVATISM AND BURKE'S CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT REASON

Conservatism is a general disposition which has been given theoretical formulation. The formulation arose as a reaction to Enlightenment thinking. The general characteristic of this disposition, according to Michael Oakeshott (1991, 168), is the tendency to use and enjoy what is available rather than to wish for or look for something else. That is why conservatives take pride in the inheritance of the past and are averse to rapid change and innovation. A central reoccurring theme of conservatism is its defence of tradition which is conceptualised as the values, practices, or institutions that have endured through time and which have been passed down from one generation to the next. Conservatives venerate tradition considered to be relevant in the development process, because it generates, for both society and the individual, a sense of identity and provides a stable base and an organising principle. Established customs and practices are frameworks that individuals can recognise; they are familiar and reassuring. Tradition thus provides people with a feeling of "rootedness" and belonging, which is all the stronger because it is historically based. It generates social cohesion by linking people to the past and providing them with a collective sense of who they are and what they could be. Tradition, therefore, consists of more than political institutions that have stood the test of time; rather it encompasses all those customs and social practices that are familiar and generate security and belongingness.

Thus, conservatism supports continuity in politics, the maintenance of existing institutions and practices, and is suspicious of change, particularly of large and sudden change, and above all of violent and systematic revolutionary change. At its most rudimentary, this is simply a widespread human disposition; a disposition to love the familiar and to fear the unknown. This is present to some extent in everyone, though by no means universally predominant. Suspicion of change is not the same thing as a rigid opposition to it. In fact, Burke (1901, 19-20) noted that "A state without a means of some change is without the means of its conservation." But, for the conservative, if there is to be change it should be gradual, with each step carefully considered. The reason is that change is considered as a journey into the unknown: it creates uncertainty and insecurity which can endanger our collective happiness.

Another recurrent theme of conservatism is a kind of scepticism about human reason which is predicated on human fallibility. It was considered self-evident that human faculties did not have the capacity to comprehend the vastness and complexity of all creation and, therefore, men would be mistaken in believing that they could acquire the knowledge and skill needed to determine the shape and direction of society. Abstract reason is a device invented by humans and so has human defects; it cannot provide absolute truths. Thus, systems of thought founded upon the seductiveness of the logic of reason does not have a reliable basis. Conservatives are therefore suspicious of abstract ideas and systems of thought that claim to understand what is, they argue, simply incomprehensible. They prefer to ground their ideas in tradition, experience, and history, adopting a cautious, moderate, and above all pragmatic approach to the world.

An organic conception of society is also another theme in conservative thought. It is believed that human beings and society are organically or internally related. Individual human beings are not fully formed, except in their basic biological aspect, independently of the social institutions and practices within which they grow up. There is, therefore, no universal human nature. People's needs, desires, and expectations differ, from time to time and from place to place. Social institutions generally, especially the state and its laws, should not be thought of as appliances, like a bicycle or a toothbrush, selected for an already formed purpose. All these themes find expression in Burke's political thought.

Burke [1729-1797] was a leading thinker and political philosopher of the eighteenth century. His thought represents an anti-Enlightenment thinking. He fundamentally contended that philosophers would be more productive if they use their time to penetrate the meaning and wisdom contained in tradition rather than trying naked (that is, reason operating outside the guidance of tradition) to construct a new social order. The image of nakedness implies, as John White (1998, 92) argues, the incivility and inhumanness of "reason" and all human life without custom and tradition.

Burke's (1790, 101) reaction to the Enlightenment conception of tradition is set out, though not in a systematic way, in his *Reflections on the revolution in France*. The book is a reaction to the French Revolution which was believed to follow logically from Enlightenment thinking. The Revolution, as Harries (2003, 27) remarks, was highly popular in England and was conceived as an immensely liberating step forward for mankind by the enlightened opinion of the day. So, in launching an attack on the Revolution at that time, Burke was not expressing a popular opinion among the English men, but rather going against the tide.

Central to Burke's reaction to the French Revolution was a profound hostility towards what he calls variously speculation, metaphysics, theoretical reasoning as applied to social and political issues, and his conviction of the damage of such applications. At the time of writing the book, revolutionaries in France believed that they could reconstruct the world from scratch by the application of general, abstract principles and by putting into action beliefs about the power of human reason that had been energetically propagated by representatives of the Enlightenment in the preceding decades.

Burke (1790, 101) rejects the Enlightenment conception of reason and its role in society. For instance, he (1790, 101, 124) talks of the "fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason" to denounce the absolute power predicated on reason in opposition to

customs and tradition or more properly what he calls prejudice. He rejects the Enlightenment conception of reason and its opposition to tradition for two reasons. The first has to do with the nature of society and politics, while the second has to do with the rejection of the Enlightenment's conception of the nature of man. He rejects the Enlightenment view of man as a predominantly rational, calculating, and logical being. For him, man truly has a rational side, but this is but a small part of his total makeup. He (1970, 124) writes that:

... in this enlightenment age, I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of unthought feelings: that instead of casting away all our old prejudice, we cherish them to a very considerable degree; ... we cherish them because they are prejudiced, and the longer they have lasted, the more general they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put them to live and trade each in his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that the stock of reason in each man is small and that the individual would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nation and ages.

His belief is that habits, instincts, customs, traditions, prejudices—the accumulated practical knowledge acquired consciously and unconsciously through experience—are all more important than, but can also fortify the contrivance of, reason. Man is not only an embodiment of reason but, in addition, he embodies these other elements. Thus, for him, rather than see tradition, customs, prejudice, and the community's accumulated experience as hindrances to reasoning and the organisation of a humane social order, they should be embraced and taken into full consideration.

Burke's conception of society is important for the understanding of the role of tradition in the human community. For him, society is neither a collection of loosely related individuals nor a mechanism with interchangeable parts. Rather, it is a living organism; anything that affects the well-being of any part will affect the whole. He (1790, 128) argues that

...society is indeed, a contract. Subordinate contracts of objects of mere occasional interests may be dissolved at pleasure, but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, callic or tobacco, or some other such low concern to be taken up for a little temporary interests and to be dissolved by the fancy and the parties. It is to be looked on with reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and all perfection. As the end of such partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.

In conceiving of human society as a partnership between the living, the dead, and the unborn, Burke demonstrates the link between the past and the future. He also

demonstrates that historical continuity is crucial to society. And, for him, it is tradition that gives sense to the continuity. On his account of society, Burke believes that to get the best solution to political and social problems, people have to take account, among other things, of history. He believes that the tradition which represents the people's ties with the past and future can provide a better answer to their political problems than abstract reason. Thus, the present constitution of any society is therefore not the property of only the living to make of it by whatever they will through the use of "naked reason." It is, as Harries (2003, 34) explains, "an estate held in trust; morally those who held it have a fiduciary responsibility to hand it on in good condition." It is this trust that the revolutionaries betrayed. In the name of freedom and equality, they were destroying all the historical institutions of legitimate authority. It is believed that with authority displaced, the inevitable consequence will not be liberty but an increasing dependence on naked forces to compel obedience and maintain order. With extraordinary insight at the outset of the revolution, when euphoria and optimism and idealism reigned, Burke was able to intuit that it will end in terror and dictatorship. And it did.

Also important to the understanding of Burke's conception of tradition is the idea of prejudice. The ideal of the Enlightenment culture is to be a man free from the darkness of prejudice. It implies believing or judging either on authority (as in religion) or from reverence for custom and tradition (as in provincialism). It is to judge without justification. In the light of this thinking, it is understood that a person should not be prejudiced because they hinder true knowledge and the nature of things. In this thinking, a person who holds things on account of custom or authority, whether of family, religion, state, or church is held to be prejudiced. Such people are held to be those who made judgement prior to rational analysis or without rational foundation. Being prejudiced is, therefore, believed to be the result of a failure to live up to the individualistic ideal of the Enlightenment.

On the contrary, Burke sees prejudice from a positive perspective and insists on its relevance and primacy for the social and, consequently, the political order. Prejudice arises from custom, from the common wisdom, values, or ethos of a given social unit. These latter are formative of the people and therefore also formative of the political order. In his perspective, prejudice is the complex of attitudes, responses, and habits which is expected for a civilised mode of life with a given community. Thus, there is a social dimension to prejudice. It is the collective, nonconstitutive knowledge of peoples, races, cultures; the wisdom handed down through custom and tradition. It is the natural impulse of the mind which comes from partaking in the continuous activities of a culture or community.

Contrary to the Enlightenment thinking, Burke (1790, 128) supposes that prejudice, which is almost interchangeable with custom and tradition, possesses a kind of rationality even though it is not scientific or individualistic. It is composed of the collected reason of the age. While Enlightenment thinkers had only their own generation as the basis for judgement, tradition or prejudice has the wisdom of many generations as its basis. This is not to say, however, that Burke totally despises the role of reason in the social order. For instance, he (1775, 50) writes:

In framing a plan for this purpose [how to revive the friendliness of American colonies] endeavoured to put himself in that frame of mind which

was the most natural and the most reasonable and which was certainly the most probable means of securing me from error. I set out with a perfect distinction of my own abilities, a total renunciation of every speculation of my own and with a profound reverence for the wisdom of our ancestors, who have left us inheritance of so happily a constitution and flourishing an empire and what is a thousand times more valuable, the treasury of the maxims and principles which forward the one and obtained the other.

One sees from the above the Cartesian element in Burke by which he tries to divest himself of his prejudices, but then he proceeds not by reason alone as Descartes presupposes but from two historical sources of political truth—the “inheritance of the British constitution” and empire, and the “treasury of Maxims and principles” upon which the inheritance was based. His employment of the “wisdom of our ancestors” is based on the conviction that the common moral experience of mankind or of the nation as a whole is more certain than that of the theoretical speculative claims about nature of the state or moral order. White (1998, 93), explaining Burke’s position, argues that:

Custom and tradition tend to include within them a kind of wisdom. There is nothing mystical about the conception: it is largely a practical point. It is the point that if some practice is handed down through generations and if therefore it has not only been practiced recently but has been part of the practice of generation, it has also been judged and lived out by those generations. This suggests that there is at least some wisdom in the practice, since had there been none in it; the practice would have been changed overtime.

This pragmatic explanation could be predicated on the supposition that human beings have the ability to reason and to determine what is good and proper for them. In other words, what is called “traditional” is so called because there is wisdom in its continuation. This explanation is not absolute because human beings in the community may be so culturally habituated that they uncritically hold to particular traditions and prejudices even when there is no reason to continue to perpetuate them. This kind of tendency can be labelled “uncritical conservatism” or “uncritical traditionalism.”

It is pertinent to acknowledge that Burke does not advocate that reason is irrelevant in the sociopolitical development of society. What he calls for is the need to be aware of its limitation. In particular, Burke (1790) draws a distinction between what we might term embodied reason and naked or abstract reason. The former is reason as expressed through evolving human relationships, habits, manners, prejudices, traditions, and institutions. The latter refers to reason divorced from its context. He believes that it is the socio-cultural and political circumstance of every society that gives every political principle its distinguishing colour and discriminating effect. And, further, that the circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind. He argues that it is a deep mistake of logic to seek to apply abstract principles out of context to human affairs. However, Burke seems to concede too much to tradition. Though he does so because he thinks that tradition and prejudice preserve and embody human wisdom, and the reasoned arrangements and understanding in which society depends, he is guilty of the tendency towards uncritical traditionalism.

The tendency seems apparent in Burke in spite of the cogency of his claim that tradition, custom, prejudice, and the like are relevant in human affairs and to progress. For instance he (1790, 126) contends that:

...on these ideas, instead of quarrelling with establishment as some do who had made a philosophy and a religion of their hostility to such institutions, *we cleave to them*. We also resolve to keep an established church, an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, an established democracy, each in the degree it exists and in no greater. [Emphasis added.]

Such a “cleaving to tradition” perpetuates the Enlightenment misconception of an opposition between tradition and reason; and probably reinforces the Enlightenment critique of tradition and authority. This is because this Burkean type of thinking seems to imply that tradition is immune to reason and it is on this basis that Enlightenment thinkers reject tradition. *What is needed, rather, is a framework in which tradition embodies reason and the possibility of critique*. It is this that can explain why traditions change and why societies experience development while launching forth from certain traditions.

In challenging the Enlightenment progressivism and its threat to social order and stability, Burke seems to imply that change is impossible without abstract reason. This reveals Burke’s failure to see that progress (change) could arise within a tradition, or within a social order itself, thereby undermining or bringing change to the very traditions on which the social order is based. To fail to see this is to conceive tradition as a product or a static, unchangeable phenomenon. On the contrary, tradition, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it by ourselves, in as much as we always understand and participate in the evolution of tradition and, hence, further determine it ourselves (see Chan 1984, 424).

Thus, within the Enlightenment or Burkean framework, tradition becomes a dead concept. And, as such, it fails to recognise the dynamism inherent in it as an evolving phenomenon. In a very real sense, every tradition is always a living tradition (Chan 1984, 424). The concept of tradition should be distinguished from traditionalism, which Chan conceives as that “in which everything transmitted from the past is held to be sacred and unchangeable.” Conceived in this dynamic sense, tradition is indispensable in the development of any society. Let us conclude with this issue of how it is indispensable.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL THEORY OF TRADITION

Tradition is ontological to the being of man and hence it is an indispensable phenomenon. Whether we talk of societies, communities—intellectual or nonintellectual—or we talk of science, tradition can be conceived as an ontological commitment that allows us as human beings to launch forward in any endeavour. We have to realise that human beings do not have their being and existence in nothingness but in a social context which influences them. It is within this social context that human beings grow and mature. This implies that the beliefs a person grows up with cannot be exclusively accounted for in terms of experience and reason alone; they embody a

tradition transmitted to us. And it is within this tradition that we make sense of the world, at least initially. This means that tradition provides the theories that construct the objects that we initially find in the world (Bevir 2000, 36). Gadamer reiterates the ontological status of tradition when he (1989, 277) argues that:

The idea of absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstance in which it operates.

What Gadamer means is that tradition is constitutive of our being, our reason, and experience, and that an unstructured reason, that is, the idea of total freedom from the influence of prejudice (or tradition) is not a historical possibility. This seems to be what Burke implies when he says we cannot do without tradition.

The reference to Gadamer does not mean that one accepts fully his hermeneutic theory of tradition. This is because, while he correctly explicates the value of tradition, he seems to concede too much to it by downplaying the critical resource of hermeneutics (Piercey 2004, 265). According to Paul Ricoeur (Piercey 2004), and rightly so, we must rethink the assumption that being embedded in a tradition is opposed to distancing oneself from it and criticising it. Gadamer seems to see such distancing as a sort of ontological fall from grace because such a distance is believed to disrupt the relation of belonging that makes understanding possible. But a critical distance from a tradition is not necessarily an obstacle to understanding. We can acknowledge our dependence on tradition while at the same time reinterpreting, reinterpreting, and modifying it in the interest of emancipation.

What we are trying to drive at is that tradition is constitutive of our being in the world. Tradition is the self-intelligibility of the past in the present, a continuous evolving and mutating intelligibility. This critical element in tradition allows us to have a historical sense not only of the pastness of the past but also of the presence of the past. To be critical of tradition does not really mean to debunk it, it only represents a questioning of our being in the world, a critique of our place in time and of our contemporaneity. Instead of living in the present as a moment without history, an existence without foundation, a critical traditionalist engages tradition and lives in the present as a moment of the past with a clear awareness, not of what is dead, but of what is already living. It thus becomes a fact that everyone at all times set out from an inherited and shared set of understanding about the world and how to secure a place in it. As we have already noted, however, we should come to realise that although tradition is unavoidable, it is only so as a starting point, not as something that absolutely limits further performance. We should not therefore see tradition as representing an inevitable presence that structures all the individual ever does without giving room for human agency.

What the foregoing shows is that it is implausible and unacceptable to conceive tradition as the customary way of premodern people. It is an improper understanding of the nature of tradition that makes some label whole societies as premodern and, hence, traditional, in the sense that they have remained static for millennia. To view tradition this way is to play a politics of exclusion and hence view it ideologically. In this view, some societies are conceived as fundamentally traditional in the sense that they are static and old-fashioned. This understanding of tradition creates a problem for social analysts because when one looks at the so-called traditional societies, one is confronted

with a history of change which is sometimes as dramatic as one sees throughout, say, European history.

One of the keys to a proper understanding of the nature and function of tradition is to understand the human process of socialisation or how individuals learn and how knowledge changes. This is because tradition is the web of social inheritance of a people. It could also be seen as a form of knowledge (Barnes 1995, 112). One important thing about social inheritance, or inherited knowledge, which includes knowledge-how, is that it is shared by a group. Tradition is not a personal thing. One can share in the traditions of one's country, tribe, or even family but those things which one does alone are not really traditions as such.

Human beings as social animals are not born with minds preprogrammed with information about the world and how to behave and communicate in it. We are born into an already constituted world with certain language, culture, worldview, and ways of doing things. We are born into a tradition tried and tested. It is in the midst of this social structure that we realise our existence and orient ourselves. So, our being is constituted by tradition. It is this that seems to explain the habituation of tradition and the difficulty of breaking from it once one has carried it on for a considerable period of time.

On the whole, tradition affords us something to begin with, giving us a clear idea of what to expect and how to proceed. Karl Popper (1991, 122), arguing for the necessity of tradition, writes:

Whenever we happen to be surrounded by either a natural environment or a social environment in which we know so little that we cannot predict what will happen, then we become anxious and terrified. This is because if there is no possibility of our predicting what will happen in our environment—for example, how people will behave—then there is no possibility of reacting rationally.

So when we examine the social life critically we see that there is an evident need for tradition. It allows rational expectation and rational behaviour. It provides a social structure that brings order and also gives us something which we can criticize, change, and make improvement upon.

The rationalist predilection for new ideas and desire to create a better social world underrates the value of and the need for tradition. While a new social world based on new ideas may be significant in some sense, the problem is that within the social world, it is practically impossible and even undesirable, at every generation, to wipe off the social world and start from the scratch with a brand new world. If the world is rationally constructed using rationalistic blueprints, there is no reason to believe that it would be a better world.

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