Tradition Vs Modern Essay, Research Paper

The terms ??traditional?? and ??modern?? are so often used in conversation, and also in reference to Society, that it is a good exercise to consider what these terms do mean in a comparative light. Berman in All that is solid melts in air puts forward an interesting set of ideas in the comment that people who live in traditional ways, or in modern ones, can almost be said to occupy different states of mind. For instance, a full 500 years have passed since some peoples first met up with the influences of the more modern Western world. (1988, pp. 15-16) However, in many cases, the adjustment has still not been made, and the conflict of what is traditional and what is modern continues to occur with different impacts upon the individual, as well as the society in which he or she lives which is apt to reflect an ongoing conflict.

For example, it could be said that what is lived in a remote western Chinese village differs very much from the experience that is given to human beings by life in New York City. It would be easy to state that the former was very ??backward?? or just very different from what is imparted by New York City, but obviously, this contrast cannot be made too neatly. The modern has arrived in mainland China, little by little, over centuries. On the other hand, what is modern or ??foreign?? has not been absorbed completely, and varies greatly from place to place in China. Furthermore, the systems under which modern influence did begin to arrive happened to be different from those which produced modernity in the West. In the traditional society of mainland China, western influence came only in a trickle for some time, only to coastal or other directly affected areas during the centuries of attempted European colonization of China, and afterwards, only according to what a Communist regime has permitted to take root in the country. The dichotomy of convention also does not give much time to just what was introduced or expanded into China by the neighbouring countries of Korea or Japan, by the period of British authority over some parts of China, and what ideas or practices really came from within the society itself. The Chinese experience has involved various things which would seem to match what happened in the West, as in governing a mass population, or industrialization, but the results have differed from what has been the experience of the West or for that matter, the experiences of other traditional societies that have also been exposed to Modernity by way of mainly outside forces.

The social sciences make use of the terms, Traditional vs. Modern, in ways that are sometimes just as vague as those of ordinary conversation. As Eisenstadt asserted, ??the central preoccupation of modern social thought and sociology has been unraveling the nature of the modern social order??. (1973, p. 4) It is argued that the changes brought by the forces of modernity, and which the social sciences have to take into account, have been the dichotomies of liberty versus Authority, of stability and continuity versus Change, and of what is called modern social rationality versus Cultural orientations. (Eisenstadt, 1973, pp. 4-5) The last concept, that of modern social rationality in contrast with usually much, much older cultural orientations, seems to be helpful in understanding what is meant by traditional society in its different elements that do not fit with the modern. Wagner stressed how difficult it has been to describe the ??modern society?? as much as we use the term as a kind of convention. The basic distinction between these social developments and ??traditional societies?? is very often to be found in social scientific writing, even though it is known that what happens when the modern meets the traditional can be unpredictable, that is can take a very long time to occur, and that this does not occur smoothly or in the same ways from place to place. (1999, p.3) It seems that at best we are really dealing with patterns and certain tendencies which can be alleged to mark traditional societies from modern societies.

All of these accounts to which this paper has referred so far seem to emphasize that traditional societies are those that have yet to be exposed to Modernity, i.e., the forces of novelty that have had their roots in the West, as it is held to have moved quickly beyond the scope of traditional societies, and particularly after the forces that were set in motion by the Industrial Revolution. Gutting defined Modernity as a set of conditions which promote the idea of human beings having their greater independence from, ??arbitrary, external authorities??, and this set of conditions is one that is urging us to be under the control only of our own rational faculties. The Modern Age in the West began with ideas of great optimism as to what a free and enlightened humankind might do to improve the human condition, and with great attention to science and to politics. (1999, p.1) It is explained how the idea of the modern came to emphasize the dichotomy between authority and reason as the influences that ought to shape how people see things, direct their lives, and respond to what happens around them.

At this point, it seems that an error of concepts is made by too much demarcating along this line of personal reason. Modern societies do present situations in which individuals cannot use their reason alone to control their lives. For example, modern and traditional societies have still not come to terms with the timeless question of what happens when a war occurs: individual power or reason cannot prevent the individual who is forced to join his country??s war effort from doing so. He or she is still controlled by the state, as it has perhaps replaced the traditional forces which are said to give those who live in traditional societies less control over their experience of life. Moreover, the use of reason is only possible when Freedom and options have been maximized and it is not clear if modernity has really done this for the vast majority of people.

Reason is not equal to all of the problems that confront modern societies. It may be a simple error to assume that reason is far more often found in modern society than it is in traditional societies, those which are believed to still rest on authority that is outside of the individual, and with traditional society probably having its power rooted in what was long ago established and has become a set of traditions all in itself. Modernity would seem to be an abstract concept too, however, for one wonders just how free individuals living in complex societies are, in relation to their fellows who still dwell in traditional societies. In short, it can be difficult to see what is the result of pure reason, or personal agency, in a post-industrial setting such as urban Canada. People do seem as shaped by forces beyond their control, including political and governmental authority. They are bound by the need to earn a living and in a society that places the most weight on what the individual can do on her or his own, rather than on the family, the extended family, the clan, and all else that we tend to believe belong really to traditional societies. The result is a mixed blessing: persons have greater choices perhaps but they are also solely responsible for their own progress and in cases where this is not happening as one would wish, there is not the ??safety net?? that can be offered by traditional social organization, including the family, or the traditional society.

Campbell??s work on the solidarity of the family has put emphasis on ideas which most would agree belong to the traditional. In the Greek mountain community that Campbell studied, he found that ideas of lineage were important, as they are in many ??traditional?? societies. (1964, p.185) What is implied is that such thinking has gone away in modern societies, replaced by the greater weight placed on the concept of the individual, a generic unit who has choices which do not rely so much on the social position into which a person is born or the social group to which he or she belongs, again by birth and upbringing. Family prestige is very important and supports the idea of the hierarchy established very long ago, the honour of the family and what has to be done to see that this is not damaged and carries on, and the honourable man is given various ideals that have to be upheld. In this way, this traditional society features its own system of action and social control that is independent of what is going on in the greater and supposedly, more modern society. (1964, pp. 268-278) When Campbell??s notes are read carefully, it is not difficult for the reader to think of corresponding customs and modes of behavior which go on within various countries of the West as they are held to be more shaped by the forces of modernity.

Given that the influences of the modern world are so irregular in the different ways in which they shape the traditional societies to which they are exposed, one wonders if such a definite line can be drawn between these two sets of concepts. In summary, it seems to be that the split between the modern and the traditional is rather a convenient short-gap that is used by the social sciences as they are yet to truly define the traditional accurately, in relation to an equally hazy concept of the modern. However, these are probably the only guidelines on this enormous subject that can be employed in referring to what everyone knows are two contrasting kinds of societies and influences. As long as researchers are aware that modernity and tradition are quite vague terms, that modernity does not necessarily revolve around the concept of greater personal freedom, or that traditional societies do not always mean a complete absence of personal choice or security, the most usual ??buzzwords?? of the social sciences may be harmless, and the resulting models based in ideas of tradition versus modernity, about the only vague guidelines that are possible in indicating that one refers to one set of phenomena in contrast with the other. There is room for wrong assumption when the modern world is held up as something advanced, or terribly different, from the dynamics of traditional societies and what they ask of the individuals who live in them. They differ, but we must see that some phenomena are probably about the same, and that the dichotomy between ??traditional?? and ??modern?? is not written in stone.

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