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State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND IDENTITY POLITICS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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This discussion is principally concerned with the political aspects of one of the most interesting of postcolonial phenomena in Asia and the Pacific. Put briefly, this is to do with the rediscovery or reinvigoration of autochthonous cultural traditions—or at least selected elements of such traditions—in the contemporary period.

Movements promoting such traditions are often part of a broader project of postcolonial rebuilding that is promoting renewed pride in a heritage that may have been suppressed or virtually destroyed by colonial powers. The phenomenon is hardly unique to Asia and the Pacific—it has been just as evident in Africa and the Middle East. A similar phenomenon is recognisable also in the heartlands of some former colonial powers.

Across Europe, cultural identities are being asserted—at a sub-state level in explicit political forms from Scotland to Catalonia, at a supra-state level across northern Scandinavia by the Sami people, or at the level of the state itself in the case of Germany where the collapse of the Wall has raised perceived problems arising from the reintegration of a suitable, coherent national identity. And it is certainly recognisable in the current nation-building projects of many newly independent countries following the breakdown

of the Soviet Empire.

All these movements vary enormously in the actual content of their programs and the symbolic resources they use, as well as in the means that they deploy in achieving their political goals. But they do share much in common with respect to their general concerns about cultural identity. The close association of such movements with ideas of liberation and regeneration also means that they are generally seen to represent a positive manifestation of identity politics, and a cause for celebration in a world where cultural difference seems to have become a good in itself. They are also seen as inherently 'democratic' in some sense—as if the revival of traditions and cultural identities is in itself a manifestation of democracy. There are exceptions, of course, and few would endorse the way in which chauvinistic aspects of identity politics have been manifest in Bosnia-Herzegovina in recent times. This is an obvious case where it has assumed a violent, and ultimately destructive, form. There are other forms as well which, although not violent, nonetheless have a less attractive side. My own work on issues arising from identity politics in the South Pacific, and more recently on the so-called

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'Asian values' debate in Southeast Asia, has concentrated on certain negative aspects that have been evident in some political expressions of traditionalism in the region as well as the implications that this has for democratic governance.

IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY

My recent study, *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa* (Lawson 1996a), on which some important aspects of this discussion paper are based, is concerned with two major aspects of cultural revival and traditionalism. First, it investigates the way in which the very idea of 'tradition' becomes transformed into an ideology of traditionalism under certain circumstances, and is then deployed by political élites for particular purposes. There has been a fairly substantial literature on aspects of the 'politics of tradition', both with respect to the South Pacific region as well as elsewhere. Moreover, given the scope of the phenomenon referred to above, it is hardly surprising that these studies have not been confined simply to the non-Western world. Indeed, the first major contribution to this debate, the well-known *Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), drew examples from a variety of regions, including Europe.

Since then, there has been a plethora of further studies and cases, as well as refinements of ideas about 'constructing' or 'inventing' traditions. Some of the later literature, however, has been explicitly critical of approaches which assume that relatively recent exercises in construction are somehow less 'authentic' in cultural terms because of their modern origin. This has led to an acknowledgment that all cultural traditions are 'invented' at one time or another. In other words, they are obviously social constructions—which may be recent, or long-standing, or somewhere in between—rather than naturally-occurring phenomena. In examining the dynamics of traditionalism, however, it is clear that there is certainly much political mileage to be gained from portraying certain traditions as

embedded in the ancient past. For anything that appears to be of great antiquity can be portrayed as carrying greater authority in the present. And if contemporary politicians and élites can associate themselves closely with what are assumed to be age-old cultural traditions, then so much the better from the point of their own legitimacy.

The second important aspect of the study concerns the extent to which the construction of 'tradition' in political contexts requires an opposing image to provide a contrast. While there are many variations on the theme, a persistent oppositional image that comes through in contemporary discussions of cultural traditions in the South Pacific often revolves around some concept of 'the West'. In the past there has been a fairly persistent theme of opposing the 'traditional' to the 'modern'. The image of the 'West' versus the 'non-West', however, seems to have taken over where the old tradition/modern dichotomy left off. In some places the 'non-West' has been given a more explicit form. In the South Pacific, for example, this has often been embodied in the notion of the 'Pacific Way'. For some, even more specific cultural images have been encompassed in such terms as the 'Melanesian Way'. Whichever is used, however, it is usually in opposition to the 'West'.

My more recent work on the politics of culture in Southeast Asia has identified similar exercises in cultural construction. In several of the countries that I have looked at there, especially in Singapore and Malaysia, an image of what it is to be 'Asian' has been held up by political leaders in explicit contrast with 'the West'. This exercise is, of course, central to contemporary debates about 'Asian values' or the 'Asian way' and has particular salience to discourses on democracy and human rights as well as for regional relations between countries like Australia and its northern neighbours. More generally, these developments are likely to have a significant impact on notions of good governance and all that this entails in terms of future policy directions. One interesting aspect of contemporary developments is that



whereas in relation to the South Pacific, Australians and New Zealanders are most likely to be the ones dispensing advice (as well as aid) to Pacific Islanders on how best to manage their affairs in order to achieve the basics of good governance, the economic success of East and Southeast Asian countries seems to have encouraged the view among some political leaders in that region that they now occupy the moral high ground from which to dispense advice of their own. It is worth looking at one or two instances where this has occurred.

A central message of the 'Asian values' debate, as articulated by political leaders such as Singapore's Goh Chok Tong and his predecessor Lee Kuan Yew, is that the remarkable economic growth, rising standards of living, increased longevity, low urban crime rates, and so forth, that have characterised development in parts of the region may be attributed directly to 'Asian culture'. In relation to his own country, Goh has argued that the right economic policies under good governance practices are not sufficient in themselves to preserve the high standard of living now enjoyed by virtually all Singaporeans, and that continuing success can be ensured only through maintaining the values that have brought them this far. In summary, these are 'a sense of community and nationhood, a disciplined and hardworking people, and strong moral values and family ties'. All these values, he says, are related directly to 'Asian culture' which 'puts group interest above that of the individual' (Goh 1994).

In line with the type of discourse within which these claims are embedded, the achievements of places like Singapore are contrasted with a decidedly negative image of the 'West'. The latter is depicted as a cultural or civilisational entity in tangible social and economic decline. Goh's speech referred to above in fact spent much more time delineating the apparent decline of the West than it did elaborating on Singapore's specific achievements. Other political leaders in the region such as the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, have also been very vocal in condemning perceived social and political trends

in the West. Mahathir has highlighted the apparent prevalence of a range of social problems including high rates of drug use and urban crime. He has also targeted single parenthood, divorce, and homosexuality as evidence of serious social decline. These problems have been linked, in turn, to certain Western political institutions which are seen as undermining the values most closely associated with respect and responsibility within the family, and cohesion, harmony and consensus in the broader social sphere. More specifically, social problems in the West have been linked to an 'excess of democracy'. According to critics like Mahathir, this has bred virulent forms of individualism and grasping materialism at the expense of positive community-oriented values and spiritual well-being.

This is a very brief overview of some aspects of the ideological dimensions of identity politics in Asia and the Pacific—but sufficient, I hope, to give a general idea of the way in which the idea of cultural traditions may be deployed in some political contexts. The next section considers another aspect of identity politics, and this is partly to do with the identity of the individual observers themselves. This may seem a little unusual but, as I hope to show, it is central to some of the issues introduced above. Furthermore, it was by thinking through some of these issues from the perspective of a 'Western' social scientist, and an 'outsider', at least as far as some people in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia are concerned, that I have reached some of my conclusions.

IDENTITY AND REFLEXIVITY

The degree to which the idea of 'the West' itself has emerged as a prominent theme throughout the debates referred to above is of special importance with respect to reflexive theorising across the whole range of issues. By 'reflexive' I mean the extent to which a scholar recognises the contextual nature of his or her own perspectives and the fact that these are hardly autonomous of a specific social context of their own. Given the

impact of ideas about the sociology of knowledge from Weber, Mannheim, and Popper through to the various schools of post-positivist thought flourishing today, there are probably very few social science scholars today, at least in Australia, who would attempt to claim that their investigations really are 'value-free'. This much is fairly straightforward. But reflexivity in scholarship can take many different forms and directions and these complicate the picture enormously. One possible direction is towards a radical form of cultural (and ethical) relativism. Another may take a hermeneutic form whereby 'insiders' and 'outsiders' are differentiated according to whether they 'belong' to a tradition. This latter intellectual path is especially interesting because if 'the West' is taken to constitute a mega-tradition in its own right, as some proponents of tradition-alism in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia and in the West itself have suggested, then this raises some very interesting issues for critics who are 'outsiders' as well as those who could claim to be on the 'inside'. These may seem to be 'merely' intellectual issues, but they certainly do have some very practical implications as well for 'internal' or 'indigenous' critics of elite power and privilege.

I approach the issue of 'the West', first, in the most reflexive way possible by asking myself why I have chosen to concentrate on the more negative aspects of contemporary discourses about cultural traditions and the politics of identity. Now the first thing to note is that social scientists rarely reflect on what motivates them, not so much to take an interest in a certain 'subject', but to take a particular perspective on that subject and the issues surrounding it. Apart from the fact that it seems grossly self-indulgent to commit such reflections to paper (unless it is on the occasion of retirement after a long and perhaps distinguished intellectual career), it seems to be part of one's training as a social scientist to speak and write in a detached fashion, as though one was reporting or analysing his or her material in as objective a manner as possible.

However, as suggested above, it is hard to imagine any serious social scientist these days, especially anyone working in areas involving culture, politics and identity, actually claiming that their work is 'objective' or 'value-free'. Most people who have thought about it would accept that knowledge and 'truth' about matters concerning politics, culture, society, identity and so forth, are socially constructed. Beyond that, however, there is a vast area of disagreement on matters of epistemology which obviously cannot be dealt with here. I will say, though, that my own approach, while repudiating any pretence at 'objectivity' in the sense of claiming that my research is value-free does not mean that I am prepared to indulge in value avoidance by refraining from making any critical judgements about politics in Tonga, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji or wherever.

But to return briefly to why I have concentrated largely on these negative aspects, this is undoubtedly a result of the way in which I was trained as a social scientist in an Australian university. In the department of politics in which I studied, as both an undergraduate and post-graduate student, students were taught to think critically at all times about issues arising from our subject matter. If we were set a text to read, for example, we were not asked to 'learn' what was in it, but to analyse and criticise what the author had to say and also to develop our own arguments and perspectives. In other words, we were asked specifically to question the apparent authority of the text. Let me hasten to add that not all students in Australian universities come away with this experience. Nonetheless it does occur often enough to suggest that it is reasonably common. Interestingly, this is almost exactly the opposite of what seems to be expected of undergraduate students in contemporary Malaysian and Singaporean universities, if some recent media reports are anything to go by.

In a recent article published in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, it was reported that a history professor at the University of Malaya, who had been teaching there for over 30 years, was



'haunted' by the almost total lack of discussion in his classroom due to years of students not knowing 'how not to conform'. Entitled 'Silence of the Lambs', the article went on to outline how, for a generation, 'Malaysia has worked to tame its universities' by emphasising 'political peace and quiet over academic freedom or excellence' and creating a society in which 'thinking remains a government-supervised activity'. In neighbouring Singapore, it seems that a lack of creative thinking capacity among university graduates is actually becoming a cause for concern among members of the government as well as the business community. One banker who was interviewed believed that current trends would lead to a lack of people with strong entrepreneurial abilities. He himself preferred to hire foreign-trained analysts. The Vice-Chancellor of the National University of Singapore has put it down to culture: 'The issue is not that we lack creativity, but that we are culturally reticent, so that thoughts and ideas do not get expressed.' This particular explanation of the role of culture is intensely interesting in Singapore's political context, but there is insufficient space here to unravel all its manifold implications.

Returning briefly to the contrasting background provided by my own university experience, I should also mention that having also studied political ideologies and democratic theory within a fairly liberal, critical framework, I had developed an intellectual (and practical) distaste for authoritarianism as well as for all forms of racism and other varieties of social and political intolerance. When starting my doctoral studies on politics in the South Pacific, then, I was therefore hardly an 'objective' observer of politics in the region. I did not come to it with a blank intellect. Not only had I developed an antipathy towards authoritarianism, and with it a preference for democratic forms of politics and a strong positive inclination towards supporting the full range of human rights, I was also equipped with a set of intellectual values which predisposed me to question critically everything that I was told or heard or read about politics in

the South Pacific.

Now some might think that all this intellectual baggage with which I travelled to the region reflects the Western tradition of social science. Let me hasten to say, however, that I do not think there really is any such tradition—at least not in the sense that there is anything that can be identified as a coherent, homogenous body of thought and practice characterised by a distinctive and consistent methodological approach. In fact, my view is that there really is no such thing as 'the West' at all—let alone a Western tradition of anything—although it is admittedly a useful shorthand term in many contexts. This leads directly in to a more detailed consideration of the idea of the 'West' which I will spend a little time on. I will come back later in the discussion to pick up on some of the broader implications of being an 'insider' or an 'outsider' when tradition and politics are at issue.

This idea that the 'West' is a very problematic term is something that I have come to at least partly through studying the phenomenon of what is increasingly called Occidentalism—which I take to be an inverted form of Orientalism. Every time I have been called a 'Westerner' (or worse still, a 'European') and heard the 'the West' discussed as an entity—either positively or negatively, or just in passing—it has made me reflect on what it is to be 'a Westerner', and to eventually ask, what is 'the West' anyway—or rather, what do people think it is? How is it generally perceived by different groups, and are these perception/s really valid or accurate? Do these perceptions say more about the people offering them, than they do about the object itself—that is, the West? And finally, after observing the tendency, especially by some conservative politicians in the region, to construct the opposing categories of West/non-West in quite radical terms, I thought that rather than simply accept the idea of radical cultural difference or incommensurability that this entails, that it would be more fruitful not only to question why this idea has become so popular among some political leaders, but also to

highlight some important similarities between the so-called West and non-West as well. A good place to start this is with the idea of tradition.

TRADITIONALISM

I should emphasise, first, that my critique is not of tradition as such, but rather of the way in which the idea of tradition is sometimes used in politics in the South Pacific. My critique is therefore concerned with **traditionalism**, which I suggested earlier is an ideological rendering of tradition in the sense that it gives the idea of tradition an explicit normative and prescriptive content. Traditionalism as an ideology emerges at the point where the preservation of a particular social or political practice becomes a matter of political concern, often for an instrumental reason. That is, traditionalism emerges where a practice is not only identified as constituting a tradition—but is construed as a tradition that must be adhered to or preserved. This is the point at which it becomes possible to reify, objectify, reinvent or appeal to tradition as a political legitimator. More specifically, where this works to provide normative support for established political authority, tradition emerges as a vital adjunct to political conservatism. This is because it is implicit in the ideological rendering of tradition that established social and political institutions are seen, not as a set of human constructions that are potentially alterable, but as a set of natural forms which command the automatic allegiance of those who 'belong' to them, that is, those who are supposed to follow the leaders.

This certainly seems to have been the case in places like Tonga where an active pro-democracy movement has challenged a long-entrenched élite who owe their positions to 'Tongan tradition'. The former group appeals for change, basing many of its arguments on ideas of social justice, the need for accountability and basic political rights. The Reverend Talia, speaking at a pro-democracy convention in November 1992 argued

In our beloved Tonga today there is still structural injustice after a century of so-called constitutional rule. Political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority who are able to command financial rewards out of all proportion to their actual work. This is why the pursuit of justice always labours under the dis-advantage of appearing subversive.

The main target of this attack is the Tongan nobility (rather than the person of the monarch himself). For their part, spokespeople for the nobles have responded by appeals to 'Tongan tradition' and the idea that the Tongan nobility represents the very embodiment of that tradition. The message therefore seems to be that the very essence of 'Tongan-ness' is at stake—a message which joins tradition with identity to form the basis of a fairly powerful political stance. These rhetorical tactics, however, are probably less effective than the relentless persecution of the pro-democracy movement leader Akilisi Pohiva through the courts. Since the early 1980s he has faced countless charges in the courts—many in relation to defamation charges.

The Tongan writer, F.O. Kolo, in a paper on the historiography and the myth of indigenous authenticity, has suggested that the corpus of Tongan myths, the *talatapu'a*, function ideologically to fortify the oppressive elements of Tongan society. He has outlined the political dimensions as follows.

Many of the *talatapu'a* are aristocratic in nature; they deal with aristocratic figures and views. Tu'a [commoners] are expected to believe that events told in these myths are actualities and historically true. In ceremonial speeches, we speak mythologically and symbolically, paying our utmost respect to the chiefly classes, the Kings and the Queens (Kolo 1990).

This indicates that myths may be presented in such a way that they feed directly into an historically situated notion of culture, which may then be expressed through the concept of a



society's unique traditions. This in turn may serve as an ideological buttress to the power and privileges of long-standing élite classes in contemporary contexts. In fact, as the late Roger Keesing noted, the conditions under which power configurations were originally developed and sustained, and under which the legitimating ideologies emerged and became assimilated as part of the cultural pattern, have undergone radical changes. That these power configurations continue to survive from one context to another is testimony to the power of traditionalism (Keesing 1989).

Traditionalism is hardly a phenomenon confined to the South Pacific, or to the contemporary era. And many elements of traditionalist thinking around the globe, and through time, share a great deal in common. The idea of divine authority acting to sanctify tradition is a prime example. In the case of Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa, it is evident that the power and authority claimed by chiefly leaders in all three countries, as well as the obedience enjoined on those below, have been linked explicitly with normative concepts about divinely sanctioned authority. This authority is conferred on a select class and is not as readily available (if at all) to ordinary people.

But similar concepts are undoubtedly found in a number of religious traditions around the globe—and even in more secular traditions of thought like Confucianism. They are certainly found throughout much of the history of European political and social thought. The descending thesis of government, for example, viewed all legitimate political power as emanating from God, and then being channelled directly to a monarch. These views held sway in medieval times and persisted through to the era of reaction against the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, such reaction being best exemplified by the Romantic movement. Indeed, traditionalism is, in many respects, an integral part of any form of Romanticism while Romanticism is itself a widespread form of thinking—hardly confined to any so-called

cultural or civilisational entity. Traditionalism was also an important element in classic conservative thinking from Edmund Burke through to more recent writers such as Michael Oakeshott.

One of the points that emerges through a comparative study of social and political thought, through both time and space, is that whatever other aspects of tradition in the South Pacific are held up as unique components of cultural and political identity—especially in opposition to the 'West'—it is clear that some of the justifications used to support them have a counterpart in important historic aspects of European political thought linking secular political authority to a divine source. Similar points can be made with respect to aspects of other traditions, especially in the Confucian tradition, elements of which have been compared with various strands of European political and social thought. What I am arguing, in summary, is that despite many apparent 'cultural differences' between traditions of political and social thought (which includes religious thought) around the globe, there are very many common elements as well.

CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY

Aspects of traditionalism lead directly into another important point, and that is the assumption that democracy (especially in its liberal form) is associated firmly with the West—and is in fact seen to be 'culturally embedded' in the West and therefore not necessarily suitable for export elsewhere. What is rarely emphasised, however, is the fact that the so-called Western political tradition—or more accurately traditions in the plural—have been particularly hostile to democratic ideas for most of the past two thousand years or so. It is really only in the last 50 years that democratic governance has spread throughout Western Europe and taken firm hold. And in the case of modern Greece and Spain, stable democratic government is even more recent, dating back only to the 1970s. The relatively short time that democracy has held sway in Western countries therefore invites

consideration of what it means for a practice to be 'culturally embedded'. The very term implies something that is long-standing and deeply ingrained; something that is practically part of a group's very being; and something that cannot easily take hold in an 'alien' context, let alone be imposed from outside.

As suggested above, even a cursory study of the historical record shows that democratic ideas were deeply 'alien' to much political thought in Europe until only a relatively short time ago. Indeed, some European cultures would have been seen as intrinsically hostile to such ideas. And there are also important aspects of American political thought evident in the contemporary era that are quite hostile to certain democratic ideas. I am not referring to any of the fringe groups that are most frequently in the public eye but to a very strong mainstream belief about the dangers of the 'tyranny of the majority'. It is widely believed that a tyranny in this form could come about if the United States had a system of government where democracy was actually allowed to operate more freely, rather than being impeded at every turn by a tortuous institutional system of checks and balances. Arguably, then, the present system is at least partly designed to prevent an 'excess of democracy'. One of the founders of the American constitution voiced some of the sentiments that underpin some present day perceptions of democracy: James Madison stated in no uncertain terms that 'democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths'.

So much for democracy being deeply embedded in 'Western political culture'.

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

The idea that political institutions must be embedded in their own cultural milieu raises another point about cultural difference. This is to

do with the idea that societies more or less constitute unique, bounded entities which are clearly distinguishable from each other. This is also closely connected to the idea of cultural relativism as well as the 'cultural' positioning of commentators on any cultural tradition, and brings us back to the issue of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' referred to earlier. Roger Keesing noted in a discussion on culture, class and custom in the South Pacific that some criticisms of indigenous representations of cultural identity and nationalism had drawn strong protests from those who promote the view that 'the insider position of Pacific Islanders gives them a primary right to advance representations of their cultural past.' The idea of conceding superior insight to the insider, incidentally, is a form of hermeneutic privileging which can be traced in anthropological thought at least to Clifford Geertz (but which I believe is also regarded as implicit in the work of earlier anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski and Boas). To be more specific, by hermeneutic privileging I mean that the 'insider'—the member of a cultural group, rather than an outside observer (such as an anthropologist or a political scientist)—is awarded a privileged position when it comes to the interpretation or explanation of a tradition.

This accords with the hermeneutic position adopted by some novelists, such as Jorge Luis Borges, who believe that in order to really understand a tradition, one must belong to it. Now, a crude hermeneutic thesis would go no further than this. Borges, however, acknowledges that distance can also work to the advantage of the interpreter in some ways. Furthermore, exaggerating the role of pre-understanding that comes with belonging to a tradition can lead to the idea of closed and inaccessible traditions, and to the belief that an unfamiliar tradition is indeed so alien that it may as well be from another planet. Put another way, it promotes the very problematic view of a particular culture as an entity which is enclosed in a (falsely) abstracted horizon. It also denies the possibility that so-called 'alien horizons' are open



to understanding. There is therefore good reason to be critical of the 'myth of the framework'—a myth that implies, as Richard Bernstein (1991) has put it, that we are forever enclosed in our own horizons, our own paradigms and our own cultures.

There are other problems with the hermeneutic position as well. For one thing, it requires a clear distinction between 'insiders' and outsiders'. This endorses, incidentally, yet another form of dichotomy. I should think, however, that it is not always possible to distinguish very clearly between the two. In addition, it seems obvious that a simplistic rendition of the insider/outsider theme tends to homogenise the plurality of insiders (as well as that of outsiders). This has the potential for reducing the whole body of insiders to a uniform singularity. And if there is a leader powerful enough to claim a privileged position as the spokesperson for the group, s/he can claim to speak for the group with the only 'authentic' voice. This is similar to the mechanism through which 'culture' is sometimes equated reductively with a 'nation' which, especially when further conflated with a nation-state, may produce a singular, authentic national voice—usually the voice of a political leader.

Does all this mean that there is no place for interpretive approaches which give weight to the voices of 'insiders'? My answer is a qualified no. There is a place, but certainly not in a form which privileges the very people whose interpretations should be scrutinised most critically. Possibly a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is the best way to approach the 'texts' of political leaders, noting that this version of hermeneutics is concerned not just with clarification but with demystification as well, and with treating 'tradition' as something which may just turn out to be a repository of false consciousness. Such views on 'false consciousness', incidentally, may be a little unfashionable just now but that does not mean that they have no analytic value.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Let us move on now to one of the old favourites (but one which has a new-found popularity in the post-Cold War era especially in relation to human rights and democracy), and that is the doctrine of cultural relativism. In conventional international relations theory, not much attention was paid to the role of culture at all. Much scholarly activity in the Cold War era focused quite narrowly with the ideological polarities of the world of superpower rivalry. Many commentators have pointed out that this international milieu favoured ideologically constructed notions about democracy and human rights, and therefore suppressed tendencies to see these in culturally relative terms. A lot has changed since then. Now, especially with the rise of the Asian values debates, the activities and rhetoric of various Islamic movements and so forth, almost everything is being interpreted through the lens of culture or explained by reference to culture. Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis is but one obvious manifestation of this trend. But has the return of culture signalled the end of ideology? I would say definitely not. In my view, post-Cold War arguments about culture remain deeply embedded in issues of ideology and power. Many of the issues surrounding culture are by no means ideologically neutral, and this is as true in the South Pacific as it is in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, many parts of Europe, and the Americas.

Most conservative responses to calls for more democratic forms of governance, in the South Pacific and Southeast Asian cases that I have looked at, usually invoke the idea of cultural relativism at least implicitly. This can take various forms. First, the cultural relativist might argue, as I have mentioned above, that democracy, despite the universalist pretensions of its advocates, is attached very firmly to a particular cultural base (which is generally labelled Western). In other words, democracy is not culturally neutral and cannot therefore be transplanted at will to grow in foreign soils.

There is, however, abundant evidence throughout the world that could be used to falsify this claim.

CRITICS ON THE 'INSIDE'

Cultural relativism is also a natural haven for dogmatic hermeneuticists—especially where they close off possibilities for communication by denying a basis of shared understanding that is not tied to a particular culture. This brings me to some final points concerned with the whole 'insider-outsider' theme. In this context, let us consider first the problems posed for traditionalist opponents of democracy by internal critics of the existing order, that is, by those who can claim to actually 'belong' to the tradition themselves.

These critics obviously cannot be branded as unwelcome interlopers in the same way as, say, a foreign political scientist can. Nor can the idea of inviolable sovereignty be invoked: internal critics cannot be told that what goes on inside the borders of their own country is none of their business. Finally, they cannot be told, as an outside critic may be, that 'you simply don't understand our traditions because you are a Westerner (or whatever) and are not part of them'. The traditionalist must therefore look for another kind of argument. One of the commonest of these is that internal critics are traitors to their own cultures or traditions—that a critic of traditional leaders who appeals to democratic norms is 'too Westernised' or 'too out of touch' with the realities of their own cultures or traditional ways. This device attempts to externalise even an indigenous critic—or to brand such a critic as 'unauthentic'—that is, not a real Tongan or a real Malay, for instance.

A further aspect of the insider-outsider debate is that it concerns concepts as well. Some values, such as consensus, harmony and community-oriented ways are all construed as inherent elements of both the Pacific Way and of Asian values. Conversely, images of discord, dissensus and individualism are depicted as typically Western, if not uniquely so. In this context, Western democracy, which purportedly encapsu-

lates the latter concepts and, by implication, none of the former, is construed as an external, alien form of political rule unsuited to South Pacific or Asian societies. So we have a dichotomy between the West and the Pacific Way and/or the 'Asian Way'. This could be deconstructed at great length, but I shall just point a couple of major problems with this by way of conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Neither 'the West' nor the 'South Pacific', nor 'Asia' are coherent entities by any stretch of the imagination. Each are extremely complex heterogeneous categories. Moreover, although people may easily be able to see certain general differences between these categories, it is also possible to elucidate numerous similarities across all of them. There is a lesson in this as well for contemporary debates about multiculturalism and racism. Appreciation and toleration of cultural or ethnic difference between groups is among one of the most positive aspects of liberal thought (broadly understood) and notions of cultural relativism have assisted enormously in overcoming the crudest forms of racism. An exclusive emphasis on difference, however, where cultural markers are taken to represent radical demarcation between groups, has the potential to bring us right back to the racist point of departure.

Finally, let me point out that much of the rhetoric about 'the Pacific way' and 'the Asian way' which has come from some political leaders and commentators in the region (and which is supported implicitly by conservative commentators in the West, including Samuel Huntington) is nothing short of Orientalism in reverse. In other words, the dichotomisation of the Pacific way and the West, or Asia and the West, which has figured so prominently in much recent traditionalist/culturalist rhetoric simply replicates all the most obnoxious aspects of Orientalism, but now in the form of Occidentalism. Moreover, much of the practical action in support of this rhetoric by political leaders seems to have been directed most



frequently against local oppositional or pro-democracy movements in the region rather than any 'outsider' critics. This suggests that while the politics of identity and traditionalism certainly does have a great deal to do with fending off criticism from external sources, especially in 'the West', it usually has at least as much to do with dealing with the more dangerous gadflies at home.