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Tradition, heritage and time

Heritage is everywhere in the present world: In public life, in politics, in bureaucracy and administration, and among scholars. In research, the interest in heritage appears as a slightly younger sibling of the collective memory and commemoration studies from the 1990s. The terms partly overlap as they both spring from an interest in how the past works in the present and shapes the future. Folklorists have contributed significantly to this research, not least by arguing that heritage work is the source of new cultural expressions – not just bad history. I would nonetheless like to argue that folklorists even have another and even more significant contribution to make, represented by the concept of tradition.

The term tradition came into regular academic use in the late nineteenth century, first as a generic term for different types of folklore, and then gradually denoting cultural processes of transmission and mediation. At present it can refer to practices of communication and transmission, to shared cultural property as well as to ideologies and cultural norms. As a scientific concept, tradition is closely tied up with the modern notion of history. They are mutually constitutive concepts, twin product products of a modern experience of time and change. A temporalized idea of history emerged from the late eighteenth century and was institutionalized when history became a university discipline in the nineteenth. The new idea of history as an overall process or force was accompanied by an equally new understanding of tradition as a parallel, but different kind of temporal process. Tradition represented other types of transformations, changes and continuities. Consequently, the nineteenth century's interest in collecting and studying folk culture was not only part of modernity more general speaking, but represented a reinterpretation of certain cultural forms into a new temporal regime. The material that emerged from this process was neither discovered nor invented in the period, but inscribed into new ways of conceptualizing time and temporality. What had long been known as "popular

antiquities", "superstitions" or "peasants' beliefs" re-emerged first as folklore and then as tradition.

This genealogy situates the notion of tradition in an epistemological landscape where it is related to history, but also, to the modern experience of time that created both concepts. As an analytical tool, tradition conveys a valuable and theoretically based contribution to the understanding of culture and more particularly of cultural heritage. I will try to illustrate this by means of comparison.

To call something either tradition or heritage means to ascribe it value. In both cases this assessment takes place in the present. The values are not inherent in the tradition or the heritage piece, but produced by the appreciation. However, this intrinsic presentism is not identical in the two concepts. Naming something heritage means to give it the status of an object: A treasure, an heirloom. While tradition can refer to both objects and processes, heritage tends to define culture as items, be it material or immaterial.

The word heritage also defines the object in question as property of a special kind, with its own distinctive legal aspects. Furthermore, it implies the existence of somebody who inherits. There can be no heritage without heirs. So while heritage on the one hand makes culture into objects, it also produces subjects. The heirs can be a nation, a group or a family. One should think that this subject must exist before any heritage turns up. How can inheritance possibly take place without heirs to receive it? But in the world of cultural heritage, the opposite may be the case: Heritage creates the subject, it produces its own heirs. Reference to "cultural heritage" is an efficient means to claim cultural legitimacy and identity. Any group claiming recognition and social respect will have a stronger case if they can evoke a heritage received from the past. Heritage effectively confirms that their existence is rooted in something deeper and more serious than the whim of the moment. It is no accident that issues of identity so often are bound up with heritage rhetoric.

The notion of tradition does not focus on the subject in similar ways. Tradition does not presume a subject who owns it, and the term does not in itself imply any legal rights or ties. To be sure, tradition also assumes agents: Somebody who tells the stories or sings the songs. So people obviously create traditions, but tradition does not intrinsically produce subjects.

Collecting and researching folklore was long a project of rescue, and research questions emphasized stability and age. But the concepts that were developed have later proved to work remarkably well to investigate cultural variation, change, adaptation and processes of transmission. They have also made us realize that what appears as old, stable, traditional, and shaped by the past *always* represents variation and interpretations, and that the past in the present *always* is the product of continuous processes of negotiation and adaptation. Recent interest in traditionalization also emphasizes how cultural expressions are being authorized by reference to tradition, or by presenting themselves as traditional. Tradition works as a source of authority, supplying old forms and giving legitimacy to new expressions. A similar emphasis on variation and change cannot be found in the concept of heritage. One reason may be the tendency to objectify culture and to focus on inherently valuable products rather than on processes. Even when constructivist perspectives are employed, there is usually not much room for understanding change and variation as anything but lack of authenticity.

In a contemporary context, the notion of tradition is able to offer analytical understandings of how variation, change, adaptation and creativity is intrinsic to culture that has been passed down over time and that seems old and stable. It represent an approach to time and temporality that includes perspectives on how the past is working in and on the present. This is an important contribution to general cultural theory and to heritage studies in particular.