

# DISAPPEARING DICHOTOMIES: FIRST WORLD—THIRD WORLD; TRADITIONAL—MODERN

J A N E T A B U - L U G H O D

In recent years facile, popular dichotomies, such as those dividing First World from Third World or traditional from modern, have been strained to the breaking point. An important trend in today's increasingly interconnected world is the decreased congruence between spatial location and social formation. Parts of the economies of so-called Third World countries are now closely connected to an international, First World circuit of trade, technology and finance at the same time that they are tied through intricate subcontracting to local, "traditional" circuits. Such patterns have also emerged in the First World and will no doubt appear in the former Second World. The purpose of this paper is to reconceptualize terms related to the old dichotomies, paying special attention to the notion of the "traditional." This is seen as a quality more related to process than product.

THE ANALYTICAL POWER OF THE THIRD WORLD-FIRST WORLD dichotomy (as well as many other conventional antinomies) has been evaporating as a meaningful basis for taxonomy in the face of three recent developments. First, within the so-called "Third World" there has been a proliferation of a variety of intermediate types — ranging from Fourth-World basket cases (largely African nations which have, with a few exceptions, virtually dropped out of the world system), all the way to Asian NICs, whose inclusion among developing nations is increasingly problematic (Japan has already been "reclassified," and others are likely to follow). This has made it harder to retain any dichotomy, whether First World-Third World, developed-developing, industrialized-industrializing, modern-traditional, etc. There are just too many

JANET ABU-LUGHOD is Professor of Sociology and Historical Studies, and Director of the Center for Social Change at the New School for Social Research in New York, NY, USA.

intermediary types, and they are not even arrayed neatly along a single continuum. Like the early astronomers, we have had to posit an increasing number of “epicycles,” such as overurbanization, underconsumption, quality of life, etc., to try to justify retention of the dichotomy in the face of empirical exceptions.

Second, there has been a reduced congruence between spatial location and the social formations we formerly associated with these older antonyms. Such dichotomous terms as colonizers and colonized, “old” states and newly independent ones, the West and the East (most recently rotated 90 degrees to become the North and the South), core and periphery, etc., are now less accurate as denotations of particular positions within the international division of labor. Many of these contrasts once depended upon a geographic distinction, but today this neat topographical congruence has only weak predictive value. (Is Australia East and South? Is Japan West and North?)

Third, under conditions of the new international division of labor (a term first coined by Froebel, et al., in 1980),<sup>1</sup> it is becoming harder and harder to place even individual countries, much less whole regions or continents, into one category or the other, even if we ballast geographical location. The contrasts in most instances are now shifted to *within* countries.<sup>2</sup> Thus, an upper circuit of high finance, information, production and trade now connects *portions* of the economies of places in both the First and Third Worlds into a single interdependent system with an increasingly globalized culture.<sup>3</sup> And it appears that with recent changes in Eastern Europe, the zone formerly known — albeit only in its ghost-like absence from discussions — as the Second World will join this global mix.

But co-existing within these same countries are lower circuits which, while apparently rather autonomous, are increasingly linked in a subordinate way to the commands of the upper circuit. These include many of the activities that were often thought of as “traditional.” Here we refer to the so-called informal sector, which includes not only petty distribution but also household production and even sweatshops, etc. These were formerly reputed to be dominant in the Third World, which is where they first came to the attention of analysts. However, they have now been acknowledged to exist in both the Third and First Worlds (and will soon be noted in the Second as well). In both the Third and First Worlds, these activities, originally thought of as marginal and therefore autonomous, are increasingly linked to global production circuits of the world system via elaborate subcontracting.

This new mix is sometimes referred to (essentially glossed) by such phrases as, on the one hand, the off-shoring of production or “the global car,” and, on the other, as “bringing the Third World back home,” or, less euphemistically, “the empire strikes back.” The spatial separation is found less and less between an economic system variously called traditional, informal, noncommodified, and emphasizing use value; and one called modern, formal, commodified, and emphasizing exchange value. Rather, these so-called different systems are increasingly nested within each other in a variety of spaces, in the developed and the undeveloped or developing worlds. In place of geographic location we must substitute such variables of scale as “upper circuit” and “lower circuit,” international and local, etc.

These changes in the economic sphere are reflected in changing patterns of life and, inevitably, also in the built environment. Because of this, the ease of distinguishing “traditional” from (what?) “non-traditional (?)” architecture, which in many ways we once took for granted, is no longer present.

#### WHERE THE DICHOTOMIES CAME FROM

Western social science has had a peculiar affinity for (indeed, an addiction to) dichotomies and one-dimensional continua. During the late nineteenth century, for example, a wide variety of social theorists conceptualized society as moving from one form of organization to another — whether Henry Maine’s “from status to contract,” Ferdinand Toennies’s “from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*,” Emile Durkheim’s “from mechanical to organic solidarity,” or even Marx’s “from feudalism to capitalism” — albeit that the latter was not seen as a terminal state.<sup>5</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century many of these contrasting ways of life were translated into other sets of dichotomies/continua. Thus, three linked evolutions were posited: from rural to urban, via a process called urbanization; from pre-industrial to industrial, via a process called industrialization; and from backward to modern, via a process called modernization. In this schema the term “traditional” came to stand for all three terms that referred to the starting point: rural, pre-industrial, and “backward.”

Since mid-century these various contrasts have been given another turn, one that has made them into a set of economic and geopolitical categories into which whole countries or regions were to be sorted. Economically, the categories were transformed into developing (or less developed) versus developed (more developed), while the shorthand, in geopolitical terms, became First World and Third World.<sup>6</sup>

Geographically, Western scholars referred to the “others” as “non-western,” by which they meant societies in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Members of the non-aligned political coalition (referred to as the Group of 77 in the United Nations), in contrast, began to refer to themselves as “the South,” as in the proposed dialogue on international trade that came to be called the North-South debate.

All these terms were somehow combined into a grand stereotype that pitted the *traditional* at first against the *modern*, and then, most recently, against the “*post-modern*” — which some, especially in the field of architecture, have suggested now closes the circle by recapturing and re-using motifs selected from a repertoire of past traditions.

This is very confusing. New terms will perhaps need to be invented, since the old ones seem to have sunk under the weight of the ideological freight they have been forced to carry.

#### A NEW SET OF MEANINGS FOR TRADITIONAL

Given this decline in the credibility of dichotomous schemes, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what it is that the term “traditional” means; it is harder and harder to find clear examples of what it refers to. In desperation we tend to “break off” from the present globalization process some small pieces of relatively insulated “local” culture or regional specificity which of course still persist in every society. We then put them into a residual category we call “traditional” or vernacular; by this we mean that portion of the indigenous or local culture that still exists *outside* international events and influence.

Like the anthropologists’ vanishing tribes, however, these pieces are becoming rarer and rarer, as even hitherto remote regions are drawn into the world system, if not economically, at least in terms of the infusion of common symbolic and often technological elements. I think immediately of Afghan tribal war rugs, which are perhaps quintessential of this dilemma and are currently entering the Western market. They are “traditional” woven rugs, hand executed on “traditional” looms, geometrically designed, and in the usual tans and vegetable colors. But what do they depict? Kalishnikovs, tanks, bombs. The “modern” experiences of a war are depicted via traditional art forms which incorporate new daily experiences. To what extent does this remain part of the “traditional?” The Third World? The vernacular?

Other less exotic examples abound. My daughter, who has done her fieldwork among Bedouins in Egypt, recently

brought home a best-selling musical cassette from the “field.” The most popular “rock star” in Egypt today is a singer of Bedouin origin who records syncretic music. Listening to this tape, I immediately recognized the basic rhythms as unmistakably drawn from the percussive sounds that accompanied the “traditional” dancing horses. I remembered the sounds from when I used to take the children to watch the horses more than thirty years ago. At that time the horses performed on the streets of Cairo, and the sounds represented the “traditional” music of the Bedouins. From the opposite side of musical syncretism, there has been a proliferation in European pop music of new genres that integrate Oriental musical forms (largely Turkish in Germany, Algerian in France) with Western music. This is the clear result of a mixing up of First and Third World populations and their cultures via patterns of international migration related to “guest workers.”

And to bring the cases closer to architecture (although I am sure every reader can provide a favorite example), I would simply mention that self-built housing, often seen by architects as one of the last holdouts of the “vernacular” or the “traditional,” has gradually begun to take on a depressing international homogeneity that derives from the ubiquitous cement block — a building material that carries with it certain design principles that are independent of the culture in which it is used. Form does not follow function. Rather, the “box” follows inevitably from the dictates of the construction material.

If, in today’s world, isolated vernacular “cultural forms” have thus been “contaminated” by their inclusion in a global system, then one is tempted to look for them in the past — in the period presumably *before* they ceased to have coherence and authenticity. And one is tempted to want to protect or restore them, to preserve them from the leveling influence of globalism. One must question whether this is possible and whether it solves our dilemma.

#### THE SOURCES OF TRADITION: EXCAVATING THE PAST TO INVENT THE NEW

In 1983 Eric Hobsbawm and R. Ranger published a book on the invention of tradition.<sup>7</sup> This is not a bad place to start, since just as history can only be written from the present, so tradition can only be defined from where we stand. The past restructures in our minds, and we in the present can only interpret it by our needs. Given that, what do we today mean by a tradition?

The first question we need to ask is “whose tradition?” This brings us to the standard dilemma faced by archaeologists

when they conduct a dig. If we are not to take the unrealistic view that the past is unchanging, and if we are to address the question of *defining* tradition in ongoing societies (especially those with written or excavatable records), we are in much the same position as the archaeologist excavating a place like Troy. Assuming change as well as continuity, we must make a decision about which “level” to save, and, unavoidably, which levels to ballast. Do we concentrate on the one closest to the surface (e.g., the most recent past)? The one associated with the period of “highest” cultural achievement (regardless of when that occurred)? Or the one we prefer aesthetically?

The resolution of this dilemma is not easy, nor is it by any means “determinate.” One must recognize that the criteria for selection among potential “traditions” are indeterminate because they are, in the last analysis, highly political and normative.

The second question we need to raise is what function should tradition serve, or — to put it another way — what is the relationship between architecture and urbanism on the one hand, and ways of life and values on the other? The social scientist’s most fundamental assumption is that the built environment, especially when it can be said to have evolved vernacularly (without the intervention of foreign — either cultural or professional agents<sup>8</sup>), is functionally related to the social structure of the group producing it. One does not need to be a “functionalist,” however, to acknowledge the intimate connection between life ways and architecture.

One must raise the question, then, of how much one’s defense of traditional forms of building houses and cities is, perhaps unintentionally, also a defense of associated patterns of social interaction, including those that reinforce “traditional” patterns of domination and control. Since the built environment not only reflects such social relations but helps to perpetuate them, does the defense of “traditionalism” in architecture actually mean a defense of the status quo, or even a regression in forms of social relations? One must guard against the use (abuse?) of traditions that maintain traditional systems of domination.

I think here of the attempts in many parts of the Muslim world to preserve architectural patterns that were designed to maintain and, indeed, enforce the segregation of the sexes within the household. Such architectural solutions drawn from the past, when consciously pursued and politically and symbolically motivated, cease to be “traditional” or vernacular. They become, instead, part of the activities of modern states to impose particular values and ways of life. They are not necessarily traditional, then, since they may even stand in the way of vernacular forces for change.

## THE CREATIVE USES OF TRADITION TO CHANGE SOCIETY

Here is the real challenge we face. The reason we are interested in “traditional” forms of building dwellings and settlements is that we believe that such achievements met human needs in a more sensitive way than contemporary and/or alien methods do. It is this belief that sends us back to the past, and that sends us to the local and the specific. Both time and space are assumed to constitute the insulation that preserves the uniquely functional qualities we ascribe to traditional forms.

Our respect for these undeniable achievements, and our dissatisfaction with our current mechanisms for translating human needs into the built environment, are the motivations behind our renewed interest in vernacular architecture and settlement plans. If we are to steer the hard path between merely using this new knowledge in the pastiche of post-modernism or actually imposing it as a means for maintaining older forms of social organization and control, we must work to discover creative applications of tradition. And when we do this, we must acknowledge that neither the Third World nor the First World has a monopoly over this possibility.

I would like here to borrow from John Turner’s turn of phrase by using the word “traditioning” to refer to such “creative applications” of tradition. Many years ago Turner cautioned us to think of housing not as a noun but as a verb.<sup>9</sup> What he meant was that we should pay more attention to the process of making houses and settlements, rather than to the form of the result or outcome. Perhaps that is where we want to look to find commonalities of “tradition” across the First World-Third World divide, and where we might also find a way to distinguish between “traditional” and something else which we cannot yet name. Once we tackle the question in this way, we can think through what it is that we so treasure in what we refer to as tradition.

First, we think that in the process of traditioning there is a close connection between making and consuming an object. Thus, making grows creatively out of a given milieu. A traditional product is not a consumer good produced externally and (for profit?) in an unconnected way by “others” with little empathy or ties to the lives of the people for whom it is produced.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the connection between the maker and the consumer is one desiderata of what we call “traditional.” We think of this kind of relation as being a close one with little intermediation from the State, the economics of formal housing production, or the ideological concepts of the professional architect or planner.

Second, we think that something traditional is closely related to its symbolic meaning and emotional content. It is endowed with some special symbolic meaning or significance which is shared by both makers and users — not only intellectually but emotionally. When we are trying to define that elusive concept, authenticity, I think this is what we are trying to express. That is why the past becomes so important: because it is in the earlier architectural expressions of a society that these symbolic qualities are to be found.

The very concept of what constitutes a “home” is tied up emotionally with the “homes” of our childhood and with the status symbols we have come to read into the landscape of houses and towns. While to a modern architect this may appear as unnecessary luxury at best and as non-functional, excess baggage at worst, the defender of tradition recognizes the importance of the symbolic and the emotional — and their culturally specific character.”

Third, we think of traditioning as a collective process of making and consuming which distinguishes the creativity of “traditional” built forms from the creativity of, for example, an avant-garde artist or a genius. It is the commonness, not the uniqueness, that reinforces the collectivity. In the built environment we call it a “community” rather than an eclectic collection of houses and unrelated inhabitants. Thus, in our idea of the traditional are the following assumptions: that it is collectively built (that is, it derives from some shared sense of how its pieces connect to one another, how each dwelling is related to the space of others); that it is collectively interpreted (that is, that common meanings are attributed to its forms); and that it is collectively consumed (that is, that the use to which any single part is put is somehow related to the uses of the whole ensemble).

These three criteria are perhaps what we really mean by the traditional. From this it is clear that traditional refers to *process*, not product. It should, therefore, be expected to vary from culture to culture, because the social structural organizations that can be mobilized as “collectivities” and the emotionally symbolized elements of building are culturally specific. And it should also be the case that no special *places* in the world could have a monopoly over the genre. In all societies there are subgroups and subcultures where this process goes on.

If we combine this definition of tradition with the contention advanced earlier in this paper that the Third and First Worlds have become geographically intertwined, we should expect to find tradition in both the First and Third Worlds, and we should begin to find commonalities in the processes by which such forms are produced.

## **TRADITIONING AND ITS COMMON MANIFESTATIONS**

One of the common characteristics of traditioning is its creative recycling of existing forms, rather than either its rigid adherence to old ones or its invention of totally new ones. I think this can be found in both the so-called First World and the so-called Third World.

One example might be an authentic reuse of centrally located older quarters that, when it is successful, keeps something of the cultural uniqueness of a place while adapting it to change. Interestingly enough, there are more examples of this that come to mind in Europe than in those regions of the Third World where one might think such actions would be easier to accomplish since the historic lag between the past and the present is shorter. The re-creation in many European cities (and even in a few older areas of American cities) of a walking commercial zone, insulated from the leveling effects of the automobile, would be an example here. In their thrust toward “modernization,” many Third World cities have either severely eroded such zones by trying to make them compatible with the automobile, or they have destroyed them in their haste to join the most “advanced” societies.

A second area is in the recycling of older residential quarters while retaining the architectural details that evoke the “traditions” of earlier buildings. Here again I think the First World has sometimes been more sensitive than either the Second or Third Worlds. I have just read Jacqueline Leavitt and Susan Saegert’s new book *From Abandonment to Hope: Community-Households in Harlem*,<sup>12</sup> which captures something of what I have been calling traditioning. The book tells the story of the abandonment, in Harlem, of large numbers of apartment buildings from which landlords “walked away” in the 1970s, and which, by default (especially during New York’s fiscal crisis), the City came to own and manage. In essence, this housing — encrusted with emotional and symbolic, as well as use value, for many of its residents — dropped out of the commodity market. Where tenants could muster sufficient energy and commitment, and where they were assisted by community activists and dedicated civil servants, they could arrange to obtain ownership (or long-term rental) of the structures, which they then cooperatively renovated and managed.

In those cases that were successful, occupants managed to build not just inhabitable dwellings but a sense of “community.” They cooperated in the labor and management of the structures and benefited from the empowerment the new security of tenure gave them. Failures occurred, naturally;

but the authors attribute such failures to the inability of mere congeries of individuals to collectively restore and cooperatively manage their new "housing" — in short, to their failure to form "community."

As I read this book, I recalled a scheme I had earlier suggested for restoring the oldest quarters of Cairo.<sup>13</sup> Like Harlem, this was an area of high symbolic and architectural value — by then inherited almost exclusively by poor people. And it was literally being abandoned, as owners, speculators, and the "city" (in the guise of the Ministry of Waqf) stood by, and as upper stories crumbled, maintenance ceased, and future destruction was assured.

My scheme was simple. Communities of residents already existed in the neighborhoods, especially within the larger *rabb* (apartment) and courtyard complexes. I recommended

that these deteriorating collective units be restored sequentially, using the cooperative labor of tenants living in adjacent or nearby complexes assisted financially and technically by the City of Cairo. To do that, however, one would have needed to withdraw these units from the marketplace and to give long-term use rights to their occupants.

Both of these examples illustrate what I am trying to convey by the verb *traditioning*. I have consciously selected the examples from the extremes — New York City as representative of the First World, Cairo as quintessentially representative of the Third World. The parallels of needs and opportunities in both places are dramatic, and the solutions are not so different. This may illustrate the possible commonalities between problems in the built environment in the First and Third Worlds, especially for consumers in weak market positions, and may suggest new ways to use "tradition" creatively.

## REFERENCE NOTES

1. Froebel, Folker, J. Heinrichs, and O. Kreye, *The New International Division of Labor* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
2. An exploration of the connections between the upper and lower circuits and between First and Third Worlds is found in S. Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
3. Particularly relevant to many of the issues raised in this paper is the special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* (June 1990) on Global Culture, available after this paper was written. See also the proceedings of a recent conference on the globalization of culture held at the State University of New York, Binghamton: A. King, ed., *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*.
4. Originally conceptualized by the I.L.O. out of the African urban experience as somewhat marginal and unconnected to the "formal" economy, it was later reconceptualized, largely by T.G. McGee, as functionally linked to the formal structure in Third World cities. Most recently, Alejandro Portes has generalized this, showing the close relationship of the two not only in Third World cities but in First World cities as well. Saskia Sassen traces these connections in several First World international cities (London, New York and, significantly, Tokyo) in her *The Global City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
5. Immanuel Wallerstein has been particularly critical of the penchant for dichotomies which underlay the foundations of Western sociological theory in the nineteenth century. In numerous articles he has argued for abandoning both the conceptual dichotomies implicit in most social science, as well as the division of labor (and the lines between) among the social sciences of sociology, economics, and political science, arguing for their reunification. For a recent restatement of his position, see his article in the special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, June 1990. A fuller treatment can be found, *inter alia*, in his "Should We Unthink Nineteenth-century Social Science?" *International Journal of Social Science* (UNESCO), Vol. 118 (November 1988), pp.525–31.
6. There is no agreement on the exact origins of the term "Third World." Peter Worsley, in his *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984), traces its usage back to French demographer Alfred Sauvy and a 1952 article he published in *L'Observateur*, but attributions and dates vary widely. Some agree that it was of French journalistic provenance but really implied the equivalent of the "third estate." I have even heard somewhere of an attribution to Mao, but this seems improbable. The origin of the term is less significant than the idea that in the postwar era of the Cold War and decolonization there might be a "third way" in politics. Certainly, the term political leaders of Asia and Africa introduced in the Bandung Conference in 1955, namely, "the non-aligned," captured this political meaning better than the usage which has subsequently developed for Third World, which accompanied the addition of Latin America to Asia and Africa.
7. See E. Hobsbawm and R. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Some of the issues involved were already explored in the first IASTE international conference and have been published in J.-P. Bourdier and N. AlSayyad, eds., *Dwellings Settlements and Tradition* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989).
8. Our enchantment with the idea of "architecture without architects" certainly falls into this pattern of equating professionally designed structures with "modern" or somehow unauthentic — with contamination of the traditional.
9. See, for example, J. Turner, *Housing by People* (New York: Pantheon, 1977). But this is a theme that Turner has continually explored in other works.
10. That's why I hesitated, when I said for profit, because one can think of the massive apartment blocks of Moscow, not produced for profit but nonetheless distant from the lives of the residents-to-be, which would illustrate what we mean by "nontraditional" or "unauthentic."
11. See the special issue of *Social Research* on "The Home" (Spring 1990), which presents some of the papers delivered at a conference on this topic at the New School for Social Research.
12. J. Leavitt and S. Saegert, *From Abandonment to Hope: Community-Households in Harlem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
13. J. Abu-Lughod, "Preserving the Living Heritage of Islamic Cities," in R. Holod, ed., *Toward An Architecture in the Spirit of Islam* (Philadelphia: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1978), pp.27–35 (paper first delivered in 1978 to the first Aga Khan Seminar, held near Paris). See also, in the same issue, N. Hasan, "A Project for Rehabilitating an Old Quarter of Cairo," p.35.