**Tradition**

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A Note for Theory and Methods II

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Reconceiving hermeneutical experience as an interplay between tradition and interpretation, Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, "The [hermeneutic] circle … is not formal in nature, it is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to tradition. But this is contained in our relation to tradition, in the constant process of education. Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves." (Truth and Method 261). Gadamer effortlessly connects the understanding of a text with an immersion in tradition which is cultivated through a continuous process of education. This connection between tradition and education is hardly straightforward, neither is it easy to accept when we remember the project of overhauling the university system in Colonial India, a project initiated by the British administration for different political ends. As far as the academy is concerned, our inability to invoke a tradition of normative thought and claim making without speaking of an absence, an epistemic break, or rupture between the pre-modern and the modern is a political end of the British instated education that we continue to be burdened by. To speak of colonial education alone does not go far enough, for even the conceptual language we use to describe our experience and in the process produce it, is often governed by an ambivalence, a movement between the modern and the pre-modern. We become aware of this ambivalence when we recognize that colonial power shifted the way we normatively recognize our world. At the level of discourse, it has shifted the way we cognize scientific knowledge, or the way we judge what ought to be exemplary in literature. Such a cognitive shift was induced by a falsificatory logic of colonial power (Kaviraj, "The Sudden Death of Sanskrit Knowledge" 120). The power to falsify other ways of organizing social life was an imperative that the colonial administration undertook, but in the process also introduced modern techniques and discourses of organizing social life. Political economy was a discipline which stood at the forefront of this process. Given this colonial history, how do we conceive tradition when we engage with political economy as a discursive field? To respond to Gadamer's invocation of tradition through a colonial filter: can tradition be an ontological basis for an intellectual understanding of political economy? Can we move, as far as political economy is concerned, from the methodological to the ontological through a Gadamerian sense of tradition? Can tradition structure political-economic understanding of the history of “the social” in Colonial India?

Gadamer invokes tradition to give hermeneutical experience, or the act of reading, a historicity: to convince us that the work of interpretation must be historically grounded, Gadamer relies on a tradition of authors who thought deeply about aesthetics, hermeneutics and historical experience. Political economy with its concern with the circulation of value, and the ability of the laboring activity to transform social relationships is hardly Gadamer's domain. Yet hermeneutics and political economy intersect when we see these intellectual activities as a form of interpretation that seeks to give structure, either to the act of reading as with Gadamer, or to “the social” as with political economy. Interpretation in hermeneutics and political economy is open to a particular form of historicity where a synchronic relationship between the contemporary and the past is established in an attempt to transform their respective objects of analysis. However, these two disciplines differ on the question of power. While hermeneutics stresses the power of interpretation and reading, power in political economy for us[[1]](#footnote-0) has to begin with another reading of the colonial moment.

If we take political economy as a discourse and an instrument of colonial control which reconfigured “the social”, then at the heart of this reconfiguration is the power wielded by a colonial administration to mark social difference, and conceive it as a representable variable for the purpose of governance. If “the social,” or the way we conceive of society (gesellschaft) is governed by a language which has been imposed, or that comes from elsewhere, how do we enunciate a tradition of social thought when 19th century European political economy remains silent on the question of colonialism? There is a play of absence and presence when we say that a modern configuration of “the social” as an object of study has its origins for us in 19th century British India: the presence—of a colonial configuration of the social, and the possible absence of a tradition that reflected on this configuration and sought to articulate its incongruencies in a language of its own. This play of absence and presence does not get to the heart of my question, which is the meaning of the "political-economic" when we think of political economy as having a colonial past. The work of the "-economic" in Colonial India is unclear: if we think of the colonial administration's reconfiguration of “the social” as a political project, then, would the establishment of modern economic relationships during the course of the late 19th and early 20th century in Colonial India follow as a corollary to this political end, whereby modernization progresses towards a future steady state? If not, how does the meaning of the "-economic" change in political economy when we introduce “the social” as a colonially constructed object?

As a discipline that continues to chart its intellectual history through a tradition of European authors, what are the limits to modern political economy as a field of discourse when it attempts to capture social life in the non-West? Every discipline draws a boundary beyond which it curtails its desire to understand, uncover, and eventually enchant or disenchant. Likewise, Andrew Sartori in his essay, "Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy" writes, "political economy must be understood as a discourse whose intellectual history has been constitutively bound to the history of the modern emergence of "the social" as a realm of objective interdependence grounded in the mediating role of labor." (114). “The social” that was once the intellectual space created for the colony by colonial political economy, is now taken to be the ground from where modernity continues its progress, but perhaps with a difference. With such a program, intellectual history can no longer limit itself to the West. In a Marxian reading of political economy Sartori underscores the undeniable influence of the laboring activity as structuring “the social.” Citing Herbert Marcuse, Sartori asserts that economic relationships between men form an existential condition in capitalistic society, and such interdependence between men can be understood as objective. However, to capture such economic objectivity, Sartori stitches the language of liberal political theory to formulate a way for objective interdependence to be based on subject forming ideas of individuality, freedom, and equality (115). To further clarify what he means by objective interdependence between subjective agents, Sartori limits political economy to the study of real abstractions. Such abstractions for Sartori relate to social practices (in capitalistic society) which are in themselves abstract. I read such an articulation of abstract social practice as pointing to the circulation of value, and the conversion of labor into commodity as a transformation of use-value. I also read the laboring activity in Sartori's model of the social as creating objective dependencies bound to the transformation of value, time, and space. Sartori does not invoke time and space, but gives us a labor theory of value which is interpreted through liberal political ideas of freedom, equality and individuality. In other words, in the absence of a tradition that theorizes the political in a way that accounts for capitalistic change, Sartori uses liberal political theory to explain a labor theory of value that becomes the basis for abstract social processes in the colony.

By connecting the conceptual language of liberal political theory with objective economic dependencies through an emphasis on labor, Sartori renders a modernist meaning to the "political-economic." Sartori asserts that such a subject oriented political theory does not have to be commensurable to objective (capitalistic) interdependence described above. Instead he leaves open the possibility for other *real abstractions* "which have little to do with political economy" to refract their own ways of grappling with capitalistic social practices (117). *Real abstractions* refer to any form of discursive abstraction used to mark and articulate economic interdependence. Sartori attempts to broaden the scope of the history of political-economic abstraction by including non-western schemas. Referring to non-western abstractions (or traditions), Sartori writes, "some of these discourses, are at first glance, much further away from political economy than liberal political theory is, as, for example in the neo-Vedantism of later nineteenth-and twentieth-century Bengal, which transformed … a philosophical language elaborated long before the advent of capitalist society into a means for conceptualizing the role of labor in constituting labor relations." (ibid). In such a move, a non-western tradition represents a newness that capitalistic entrenchment introduced in the colony. When Vedantic philosophical thought is transformed to represent labor relations in Colonial Bengal, it becomes a foil through which the development of labor relations can be enunciated. While I cannot go into the details of neo-Vedantic representation of labor in this essay, it seems to me that such a mapping of non-western abstraction (tradition) onto capitalistic social relationship is a step towards transforming an other-worldly conceptual language into a political lexicon. How do we interpret this transformation? Is it semantic, or is it syntactic and representational?

In Sartori's reading of the semantics of political-economic abstraction, the question of tradition as articulated by Gadamer arises as a question of perpetuating modernity into the future by encompassing non-western traditions within its fold. However, such a reading cannot forget, and has to respond to the violent use of political economic concepts to engineer a rupture by permanently creating within Colonial India the question of social difference. Sartori is relatively silent on the manufacture and proliferation of social difference in Colonial India. The closest he comes to acknowledging this is when he speculates on the possibility that political-economic concepts begin to exceed the question of epistemic and institutional violence (123). Rather than giving credence to epistemic violence, Sartori seems to be invested in mobilizing normative claim making to write a conceptual history of political-economic abstractions that chart an alternate history of the modern. In its wake such an endeavor relegates the colonial production of social difference as a question which has to be exceeded. If such an endeavour seeks to write an alternate and all encompassing history of the modern, what would be an alternate time-space coordinate for such a semantic history? Can the time-space of the modern accommodate non-western tradition as political-economic abstraction? If so, then are we reworking the historical semantics of the modern to align the non-West into the time-space of modernity? Again, is such a move to "include" semantic, or syntactic?

I would like to speculate that such a process would also have to re-work modern time-space as we know it, especially since non-western abstractions (traditions) do not always adhere to the singularity of history. If non-western abstractions do not cohere within the singularity of history, how can modern time-space include non-western schemas (traditions) without undergoing a semantic change, especially when the political-economic lexicon includes such traditions?[[2]](#footnote-1) Of course, non-western abstractions can be forced to adhere to modern space-time, then would we be describing semantic change of the modern? In order to ascribe semantic change in the modern we would have to acknowledge both the force of modernity as well as social difference for they are deeply intertwined. We have to recognize that modernity has always demarcated its outermost boundary through a difference with the non-West, and each retelling of modernity has performed this act of difference. Timothy Mitchell in his essay, "The Stage of Modernity," asserts that social difference begins with the spatialization of time, the creation of a contemporaneous geographical body (26). Let me use an example to explain what I take to be the spatialization of time: when certain people all over the globe synchronize their lives to a universal measure of time, the globe becomes a universal space that is governed by a singularity of time. Space and time become abstract and homogenous through standardization. Likewise, now imagine modernity as the measure and standard for writing history. As with all forms of standardization, modernity too defines itself through difference or that which it is not. If non-western abstraction (tradition) were a sign of this difference within the self definition of the modern, then there has to be a theory of intellectual or semantic change which can explain an inversion of this practice, and inclusion of non-western traditions within the fold of modernity without ascribing agency to modernity itself. Sartori does not provide such an explanation in his essay. Rather than being a substitute for a lexicon of political economy, we have to establish how non-western abstraction (tradition) expands the semantics of political-economic concepts. Until then, the difference in social space of the non-West will continue to question the on-going spatialization of time.

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1. I use the word us to refer to those who see a colonial past in the present. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Sartori is silent on the semantics of time-space. Nonetheless, political-economic abstractions (capital formation, labor value) are all fundamentally connected to modern time-space. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)