CIS OCCASIONAL PAPER 121

Reconciling Modernity and Tradition in a Liberal Society

Chandran Kukathas

THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

Reconciling Modernity and Tradition in a Liberal Society

Chandran Kukathas

This essay is based on the speech delivered by
Chandran Kukathas at the Mont Pelerin Society General Meeting
on 11 October 2010, Sydney

CIS Occasional Paper 121

THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

2010

Published December 2010
by The Centre for Independent Studies Limited
PO Box 92, St Leonards, NSW, 1590
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: www.cis.org.au

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Kukathas, Chandran.

Reconciling modernity and tradition in a liberal society / Chandran Kukathas.

9781864322040 (pbk.)

CIS occasional papers, 121

liberalism.
Toleration.
Liberty.
Equality.

Centre for Independent Studies (Australia)

320.51

Cover design by Ryan Acosta
Edited by Mangai Pitchai
Printed by Ligare Book Printer
Typeset in Adobe Garamond and Frugal Sans

Reconciling Modernity and Tradition in a Liberal Society

Chandran Kukathas

How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?

— W.B. Yeats, *A Prayer for My Daughter*, 26 February 1919

So you see, despite my strong sense of freedom, I have not been able to avoid my native upbringing which keeps young girls strictly apart from male strangers. If you are constantly told that it is unseemly to allow yourself as a young girl to be revealed to the gaze of strange men, and if you must stay out of the presence of men then eventually it must make you nervous to meet such creatures. This must not continue, that prejudice must be removed.

— Kartini, *Letters to Stella Zeehandelaar*, 17 May 1902

William Butler Yeats wrote *A Prayer for My Daughter* a few months after he had completed *The Second Coming*, his bleak reflection on the transformation of the modern world into one in which violence and anarchy promised to dominate human affairs. In that poem, he had lamented the falling apart of the established order: 'the blood-dimmed tide is loosed' and 'everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.' Anne Butler Yeats was born on 26 February 1919, in the month after the Irish Republic's declaration of independence and at a time when the country was turning to war. In the poem for his daughter, written in the midst of bloody violence, Yeats expresses the wish that Anne

might come to find a life free of hatred, especially intellectual hatred; that she might make a life marked not by thoughts and opinions but by the stability of the gentle and unassuming ways of a home; that she might be brought to a house by a bridegroom who would enable her to flourish under the quiet shade of custom.

Yeats's hopes for his daughter stand in striking contrast to the thoughts expressed by Kartini, the young Javanese noblewoman whose writings inspired Indonesia's nationalists at about the same time that the Irish poet was watching his own country descend into war. Kartini's writings were dominated by a longing for liberation from the tyranny of custom that required her to spend her adolescent years enclosed in the grounds of the family home, anticipating an arranged marriage to a man who would take her as one of his many wives. She associated ceremony not with innocence or beauty but with tedium and oppression. Her ardent wish was for the Dutch to leave the colonies, but not before breathing into the Indonesian archipelago the spirit of freedom she thought was to be found at that time only in Europe. Indeed, she longed to leave Java for Holland, to study and to live as an independent woman, rather than stay to become a wife and mistress of a household.*

It should come as no surprise that a European should think that the advent of modernity promised disruption and destruction, or that he should long for a return to traditional ways. The history of European thought is full of such sentiments. Nor should it astonish anyone that an Asian writer should be so critical of tradition, since the importance of modernisation has been a persistent theme in the works of non-Western intellectuals and activists from Russia and Turkey to China, India and Malaya. Yet the contrast between Yeats and Kartini bears closer analysis because it suggests that the

* I have considered Kartini's life and thought at greater length in my 'The Dilemma of a Dutiful Daughter: Love and Freedom in the Thought of Kartini,' in Debra Satz and Rob Reich (eds.), *Towards a Humanist Justice: The Political Philosophy of Susan Okin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 181–201.

tension between modernity and tradition has many dimensions and cannot be accounted for by seeking out and identifying clear fault lines dividing one kind of thinking from another. Who is for tradition and who for modernity? To pose the question in this way is already go down the wrong track.

How, then, should the question be posed? Indeed why should it be posed at all? Or to put it differently, what exactly is the question? Perhaps we might begin to work this out by reflecting on what it is that Yeats and Kartini, in their different ways, were concerned about. The first thing to notice, of course, is that these writers struggled to maintain a consistent attitude to the issues they confronted as they tried to deal with changing circumstances. The Yeats who was disdainful of politics and disapproving of the use of violence in the pursuit of Irish independence, nonetheless wrote *Easter, 1916*, in which the poet's reservations about the Easter Rising, which saw Irish republican leaders executed for treason, are transmuted into a work that eulogised the revolutionary members of the uprising in spite of Yeats's deep disagreements with them. The man who wrote critically of the revolutionaries' hardening of the heart—'enchanted to a stone'—turned into a Senator who was willing to capitalise on his fame as a Nobel laureate to become a forceful and uncompromising critic of the government and the Roman Catholic Church. The man who defended in his early poetry the life of contemplation over the life of action, as a politician spoke out passionately against the laws forbidding divorce and warned of the danger of establishing an Irish theocracy, which he was certain would end the possibility of a united Ireland. He wanted to promote the Irish language, but argued against erecting Irish signs; he wanted democratic government, but by his own admission retained some Tory sensibilities and remained suspicious of the masses. He wanted things to stay the same, yet saw that change not only was coming but had to be ushered in, perhaps even by his own efforts.

He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The dilemmas Kartini faced were different, for she had no opportunity to see a life of action and lived almost entirely in her thoughts and correspondence. As a young Javanese girl, she came to be known outside the compound of her family home only because she was taught to read and write. Kartini wrote extensively to literary women in Holland expressing her longing for freedom, for release from under the crushing weight of *adat* or custom. In some respects, she was brought up by her father in the way Yeats wanted to bring up his own daughter: to live a life devoted to a family and home, and to the nurturing of others. Though her father indulged her interests in reading, and even tolerated her expressions of longing to study in Europe, she was brought up to believe that her most important duty was to the family. Her plans to open a school for girls in Batavia brought her notoriety but no respect from the local community. Nonetheless, her Dutch friends managed to obtain a scholarship for her to study in Holland. All she had to do was to persuade her father to allow her to go. Her plan was to reform herself through study abroad, and then to return to Java to reform her society and her countrymen.

> I want to breathe in the European air to rid myself completely of the residue of prejudice which still clings to me—there is not much that still holds me back. Holland must and shall make me in reality a free woman. Your air, your cold, must dislodge all the prejudices which still cling to me. Only then shall I be free!

Remarkably, she succeeded in persuading her father to grant her permission to go. At the last minute, however, she had a change of heart, declined the scholarship, and agreed to an arranged marriage to become the principal wife of the Regent of Rembang.

For all her railing against the tyranny of custom and her plans to reform Javanese society to bring it into the modern world, Kartini found herself unable to go against what she saw as her duty to her parents and community. Though she associated her traditions with prejudice and ignorance, she found she could not forsake them because to do so would be not simply to abandon a few rules or

abstractions but to transform her relations with the people who mattered to her, and to whom she mattered also. Her feelings were perhaps not so different from those Yeats discovered when composing *Easter, 1916*, as he found himself writing not only about political events and abstract ideals but also about men he had known, with whom he had exchanged 'polite meaningless words' in spite of deep differences of opinion. The words Kartini wrote to her Dutch feminist friends expressed her strongest convictions about what it was to be free and about the importance of struggling to overcome both the injustice of colonial rule and the tyranny of custom. Yet, in the end, these convictions counted for less than the thought that to go against the wishes of those with whom she exchanged only meaningless words was somehow impossible.

Less than a year after marriage, Kartini died in childbirth. Stella Zeehandelaar, the Dutch feminist with whom she had corresponded but never met, was both shocked and outraged at this turn of events. Kartini's letters had been full of criticisms of, and expressions of loathing for, the idea of arranged marriage—and even more ferocious objections to polygamy. She had herself been torn between loyalty to her natural mother and her duty to honour her father's principal wife, and her antipathy towards this tradition was born of long and unhappy experience. For Zeehandelaar, it was inconceivable that Kartini would go willingly into an arranged marriage to a polygamist. She was convinced that only a conspiracy among the family could explain Kartini's decision to cleave to her traditions.

Liberals have often struggled to come to terms with people's attachments to their traditions—to custom, religion and local connections. Liberalism's most famous advocate, John Stuart Mill, devoted his essay *On Liberty* as much to the excoriation of custom as to the defence of individual freedom. Many modern liberals have been eager to tout the virtues of diversity, but many have equally found it difficult to tolerate customs or traditions that do not conform to liberalism's deepest commitments to equality and individual liberty. They wish to respect people's freedom to be different; but cannot remain indifferent to their attachment to traditions that

place other values—piety, quietism or simply family—above individuality, equality or freedom. The dilemma for these liberals is what to say—and do—about people who exercise their freedom by giving it away, or by refusing to nourish or promote it.

One common response has been to say that, one way or another, people have to be brought into the modern world, weaned off at least some of their traditions so they can find some place in the new society. Some think we should do it for the common good, others for the sake those traditional societies (to raise their living standards), and yet others that we should do it for the children. Another response is to say that people already are in the modern world, for the world is flat and not nearly as differentiated as we imagine. Under every traditional robe is a pocket for a cell-phone. The thought is that modernity has, or must eventually, eclipse tradition; the issue is how to manage the transformation, or to break the news to those who haven't quite cottoned on to the fact that they are moderns, living in or moving into a modern world. Another common way of putting it is to say that the problem for liberals is how to liberalise a world of people who are resistant to liberalism; and this means modernising people who are wedded to pre-modern traditions.

Yet could this way of viewing the issue be mistaken? What, in the end, is the difference between traditional and modern? Let me suggest that this distinction is not a very useful one for understanding the problems confronting liberal society, or for working out how to address them. The trouble is not that these terms have no meaning, or that the contrast between traditional and modern makes no sense; it's rather that the contrast does not pick out a tension or conflict or source of difference about which we can usefully generalise.

If we look across society, say within a nation state, it is difficult to divide people into traditional and modern by using any standard markers. We cannot, for example, say that cities are modern and rural areas are traditional. After all, we have old cities as well as young towns. Are newly growing cities made up of retirees traditional or modern? Nor would it do simply to associate the old with the traditional and the young with the modern, as if old liberals

must be traditional and young conservatives modern. We could try distinguishing *cultures* into traditional and modern, but that does not look promising since cultures themselves are difficult to define or isolate, and typically comprise what could be described as traditional and modern elements. One could be a modern Aboriginal or Maori, just as one could be a traditional Englishman (whatever that might mean). Technological sophistication does not make much difference either, since one can use modern technologies to preserve or access traditional practices—an iPod can store an ancient text (like the Quran) as easily as it can a contemporary pop song.

There is no tension in liberal society between the traditional and the modern, and there is nothing to reconcile except to the extent that in any society, there is a problem of how to face the fact of change and social transformation. To the extent that this is an issue, it is difficult to see which part of society is the traditional and which part is the modern. For example, if Australia moved from a predominantly English society to a multicultural society by admitting people from older cultural traditions, should this be seen as Australia modernising from its British traditions or becoming less modern? Multiculturalism could be seen as a modern idea; but equally it could be viewed as an anti-modern one if it means tolerating cultural diversity rather than insisting on the predominance of values some would consider modern.

Yet maybe this is all missing the point. After all, Yeats was worried about *something* when we wrote of the attractions of a return to a life away from the madding crowd, and Kartini was not deluded when she felt the weight of Javanese custom bearing down upon her. Surely there is some tension at work in a society in which such writers can express an anxiety about the way the world is moving—or failing to move—and in which the forces of change provoke hope in some and despair in others. It seems a bit much simply to say at this point: move along, nothing to see here!

I think there is a tension at work in liberal as well as other societies, but the relevant contrast is not between the traditional and the modern. The tension is between two tendencies or attitudes:

the communitarian and the cosmopolitan. When Yeats reflected on what we wanted for his daughter, his mind turned to hearth and home and to the particular attachments he thought gave life meaning, or gave days their worth. There she might be free from the hatreds that marked the wider world, where ideas clashed and conflict found no resolution. Home was where she might find shelter under the 'spreading laurel tree' of custom. In reality, however, Yeats found that it was not so easy to retreat from the wider world, for people within one's own community might be caught up in it, and if one wants to share even a few polite, meaningless words with them, then one will be drawn little by little into the vortex and find oneself involved in the world of affairs. It is hard to be merely a communitarian, for every community is to some degree a part of the world and retreat is rarely entirely possible.

From the perspective of Kartini, on the other hand, the same problem arises from the opposite direction. She wished not to retreat from the wider world but to escape into it, to find her way as an independent spirit—an unencumbered self, to use a well-known communitarian phrase—free of the demands of those to whom she was bound by ties of kinship and loyalty. But as Yeats found it hard to retreat, Kartini found it hard to escape, for the strings of attachment were hard to break. Though it is tempting to think Kartini was somehow forced to make the decision she did, or that she was the victim of some cruel conspiracy as Stella Zeehandelaar suspected, the reality was that she found herself caught between two worlds: the world of the wider society and the world of the local community.

In *The Fatal Conceit*, F.A. Hayek suggested that this is the great dilemma modern human beings face. They have built through spontaneous evolution an extended order of cooperation that transcends the face-to-face society, and this requires a kind of morality of abstract rules that makes that cooperation possible. Yet all their instincts pull them back towards the morality of the tribe, for their inclinations are to put particular loyalties above abstract concerns. In Hayek's analysis, this tension is not resolvable in any definitive way: humans simply have to live in two worlds at once. The extent

to which they will be able to do so will vary; yet there will always be those who find themselves torn as they are pulled in different directions by powerful and uncontrollable forces.

There is, however, another dimension to this matter. Some political thinkers—and activists—consider that the resolution to this problem lies in making the wider society, perhaps in the form of the state, into something much more like a moral community. Perhaps the values of the local community can be writ large, to build a state that has a substantial ethic that will give people a home in the world. Then they will not find themselves alienated, either from their local attachments or from the greater society of which they are a part. The alternative that stands in direct contrast to this view is a cosmopolitan view, which is sceptical of the claims of local communities and prefers to be guided by universal values. Both these views, in different ways, seek to find a political resolution of the tension between local attachment and the demands of the wider world, but both should be resisted. The communitarian should be resisted because the world beyond the local cannot be made to conform to a common substantive ethic when values are plural and diverse. The cosmopolitan should be resisted because there are no universal values we can safely say are universal and not in fact particular norms masquerading as universal.

Where then do we go from here? One answer, it is tempting to offer, is to say that we appeal to liberalism as the solution to the problem. The trouble is, the solutions I have already alluded to are also liberal solutions of a sort. There are liberals who propose a liberalism that involves the creation or sustaining of a kind of national community—a land that is one nation, to coin a phrase—in which certain values held to be consistent with national traditions trump all others. This communitarian liberalism does not look plausible in a society in which diversity and ethical differences prevail. On the other hand, there are liberals who propose that we should be guided by universal values and claim that liberalism is a kind of universal ethic that reason can bring all to embrace. But this also looks improbable simply because there are many people who are unwilling to accept liberalism as a substantive ethical doctrine that

can guide ethical reflection and trump particular moral convictions born of local forms of association.

So I suggest instead that the most we can hope to do is to live with the tension. For the tension in question is not one that is capable of resolution. The best we can do is stumble along making a succession of accommodations as the world changes around us. This is, of course, also a kind of liberalism. It's not the traditional view of liberalism according to modern liberals. But in my view, it is closer to the philosophical core of the liberal aspiration not to resolve differences and build a unified social order but to find ways to live with competition, conflict and division.

The Centre for Independent Studies is a non-profit, public policy research institute. Its major concern is with the principles and conditions underlying a free and open society. The Centre's activities cover a wide variety of areas dealing broadly with social, economic and foreign policy.

The Centre meets the need for informed debate on issues of importance to a free and democratic society in which individuals and business flourish, unhindered by government intervention. In encouraging competition in ideas, The Centre for Independent Studies carries out an activities programme which includes:

- research
- holding lectures, seminars and policy forums
- publishing books and papers
- issuing a quarterly journal, POLICY

For more information about CIS or to become a member, please contact:

Australia
PO Box 92, St Leonards,
NSW 1590 Australia
Ph: +61 2 9438 4377
Fax: +61 2 9439 7310
Email: cis@cis.org.au

New Zealand
PO Box 5529, Lambton Quay,
Wellington 6145 New Zealand
Ph: +64 4 499 5861
Fax: +64 4 499 5940

www.cis.org.au

Reconciling Modernity and Tradition in a Liberal Society

Many modern liberals have been eager to tout the virtues of diversity, but many have equally found it difficult to tolerate customs or traditions that do not conform to liberalism's deepest commitments to equality and individual liberty. The distinction between traditional and modern is not a very useful one for understanding the problems confronting liberal society, or for working out how to address them because the contrast does not pick out a tension or conflict about which we can usefully generalise. Chandran Kukathas suggests that as the tension in question is not one that is capable of resolution, the best we can do is stumble along making a succession of accommodations as the world changes around us. This is, of course, also a kind of liberalism.

Professor Chandran Kukathas is Chair in Political Theory at the London School of Economics. He completed his BA in History and Political Science at the Australian National University and his MA in Politics at the University of New South Wales before going on to a DPhil in Politics at Oxford University. He has taught at the Royal Military College, Canberra; Oxford; the ANU; the UNSW at the Australian Defence Force Academy; and the University of Utah.

THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

www.cis.org.au

CIS Occasional Paper 121
ISBN 978-1-86432-159-3
ISSN 0155 7386