

Editorial Foreword

THE ADAPTABILITY OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Social change in any one place or period is a process of adaptations, but the vocabulary of social science highlights the signs of process more readily than it delineates the means of adaptation. Process implies some initial push, conveniently described as an external and inexorable pressure—an imported bulldozer. Adaptation suggests a defensive (and doomed) response—the delaying action of old elites protecting their plantations, the resistance of retreating cultures tenaciously opposed to innovation, the aimless vitality of an untameable jungle of indigenous custom and social ties. The articles in this issue take a different tack, viewing traditional practices as at least half the process of change. Betty Kuyk's findings are all the more striking because black fraternal orders sprang up in the United States during the same period in which lodges, service clubs, college fraternities, and labor organizations became more important within white society. All of these organizations consciously adapted the values and rites of religion and family to define community. It is not surprising, therefore, that the African elements in these black orders have generally been overlooked. Their recognition raises interesting questions about the sources of black culture in the United States and about the rituals and forms of the voluntary associations that are often taken to be a distinguishing characteristic of American society. Using African elements, these fraternal orders helped to establish a black bourgeoisie; and in this function, too, they invite comparison with other American ethnic organizations. Various aspects of these issues have been treated in numerous articles in these pages, beginning with discussions of tradition itself (by Bendix, *CSSH* 9:3, and Shils, 13:2) and continuing through the recognition of voluntary associations as a special case of adaptation (see Freedman and Topley in 3:1, 3:3, and 3:4, Jongkind, 16:4; and Skeldon, 19:4; as well as Moore on caste among Indian immigrants, 19:1; and Maeyama on the Japanese in Brazil, 21:4).

Political marriage, of course, is a classic example of adaptive practice. It provides the central theme for many an older history of European monarchies and explains much about how Latin American elites fixed their social position (note Balmori and Oppenheimer, 21:2). Michael Fisher's subtle analysis shows a Shi'ite court in India to have been equally skilled in that strategy when the opportunity arose. (Islamic law and change as well as Shi'ism and revolution have been studied before in this volume by Roff and by Akhavi in 25:2.) Its position secured, the court then abandoned the practice that had enabled it to use the East India Company while being used by it (the relationship of India's institutions to external economic pressures is also central to the divergent interpretations of Leonard and Richards in 21:2 and 23:2; the result-

ing changes recall what for a later period Brennan labels “segmental modernization,” 23:3). After all, even the guilds of China, as Joseph Fewsmith shows, enjoyed their heyday not in some medieval past but after the impact of Western pressure and the Taiping Rebellion gave new incentives for limiting the state and opened new opportunities for doing so (on the Taiping Rebellion, see Levenson, 4:4, and Kuhn, 19:3; the modern adaptability of guilds in Europe is noted by Sewell and Truant in 21:2). As those traditional organizations became effective interest groups, Fewsmith argues, they caused a shift in the definition of matters public and private—a topic that itself deserves far more extensive comparative analysis than it has received—thereby providing surprising continuity even into the era of communist rule.

THE THIRD WORLD TRADER

The penetration of Western capitalism into the non-Western world is one of the major themes of the last two centuries, studied as evidence both of expansive vigor and of disruptive effect. But the articles in this section, like those above, focus on local adaptations to new circumstances. Kit Wesler, in a venturesome comparison of the Iroquois and the Asante, shows the importance of a strategic coastal position, prior experience, and flexible political organization in enabling certain polities to seize an advantage over their neighbors. (Note Maier’s appreciation of Asante medicine, 21:1, as another example of that culture’s vitality and Western misunderstanding.) Raymond Dumett looks at individual African traders. He, too, notes the importance of a coastal location; and readers of the preceding pages will be well prepared for his recognition that adaptable traditional structures and ties of kinship were effectively used by African entrepreneurs. (The local sources of African trade have been explored by Uzoigwe, 14:4; Perinbam, 15:4, 19:2; Hallpike, 17:1; and Hill, 18:3.) As Daniel Gross’s review article suggests, to look at externally stimulated economic development from within the local society tends to burst the conceptual constraints of paradigms formed from Western theories and concerns.

With this issue *CSSH* completes its first twenty-five years, and this number contains a general index to the subjects treated in the last five volumes. Along with those that conclude volumes 20, 15, and 11, this index reflects *CSSH*’s commitment to comparison as a method for defining the questions that need to be explored. The grouping in which an article appears suggests one set of comparisons; the editorial foreword to each issue lists a number of others. Every article, however, has important implications for still other topics and disciplines, and the index is therefore intended to aid scholars in tracking the treatment in these pages of the topics, cultures, places, and methods that particularly interest them. By using the subject index in this way, perhaps even to construct an entirely different set of comparisons, readers participate in that dialogue across disciplines to which *CSSH* is dedicated.