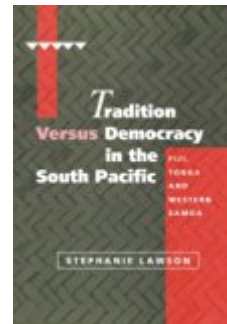


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephanie Lawson. *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. x + 228 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-49638-4.

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Stephanie Lawson's book explores the tensions, real and contrived, between tradition and democracy in the South Pacific island states of Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. The focus of the work is traditionalism, that is, the ideology of tradition or "an attitude of reverence and duty towards the practices and values transmitted from the past" (p. 17).

Lawson's intention is to demonstrate how traditionalism in some South Pacific states has served to counter progressive forces of democratisation. She argues that "the idea of tradition has been deployed ... in defence of elite power and privilege against growing demands for accountability in government [and] more extensive opportunities for participation by those without traditionally derived political or social status" (p. 5). In developing this argument it is also her intention to demonstrate more general assertions: that there is no incompatibility between democracy and non-Western societies. Moreover, the external indicators of democracy (elections, constitutions, and parliaments) do not necessarily spell the acceptance of democratic values.

The basis of her argument is that colonialism moulded indigenous political and social practices and authority structures, often distorting these traditional polities for the sake of ensuring stability of the colonial state. Indigenous beneficiaries of these colonial systems subsequently saw merit in maintaining such practices and structures in the post-colonial era, claiming that this was the traditional and thus appropriate way of doing things.

Traditionalism was thus the basis of political authority and legitimacy and was essentially cast in terms that distinguished indigenous Pacific island systems from those of the West. While this was initially useful in or-

der to assert a post-colonial national identity, over time traditionalism became a conservative force.

This is especially apparent in those Pacific island societies where, in recent years, there have been challenges to the status quo. In Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa traditionalism has been used to counter such challenges and to preserve a particular socio-political structure, thereby protecting the interests of the ruling elite. Moreover, in all three cases, conservative elites have claimed that the existing political structures, rooted in a particular interpretation of tradition, are inherently more democratic than any Western form of democracy. This implies that legitimacy is sought not simply in tradition but in asserting the democratic elements of tradition.

Lawson disputes this relativist approach to democracy, arguing that while there is no single correct form of democracy (and certainly no Western democracy that is immune from criticism) democracy embodies a certain set of norms and principles and derives from an identifiable set of values. She defines democracy as, minimally, "a system in which no person can arrogate to him or herself unconditional or unlimited power" (p. 35). Claims that indigenous traditions are democratic and that Western-style democracy has no place in the political systems of the Pacific are, she argues, disingenuous and self-serving—to those elites who expound them and who themselves are clearly living very Western life styles. Moreover, such arguments create a false dichotomy between the West and tradition in the context of Pacific island states. Lawson in fact stresses the similarities between Western and Pacific island political thought and practice, in order to counter the argument that democracy is incompatible with non-Western societies. The rise

of liberal democracy in the West arose in conditions of social hierarchy and prescriptive status. There have been similar appeals to tradition in the West, as a legitimating tool in politics.

Secular political authority has been linked to divine sources both in Western political thought and in the Pacific. There are also similarities in the invention of tradition, or in the author's words: "the propensity to legitimate present political claims by fabricating suitable traditions" (p. 13). These similarities should not be surprising however, given that many of the purported traditions are either Western (colonial) imports or have their immediate roots in colonial systems. For example, the political institutions of Tonga—which sustain the Tongan Way—are derived substantially from Western sources. In Fiji, colonial rule promoted as the model of tradition for the whole of Fiji, the structures and values surrounding chiefly power and privilege in the east of the country. Meanwhile the dynamics of tradition in Western Samoa were irrevocably altered by the imposition of national political institutions and centralisation of power.

Lawson locates her study beside what she sees as a growing body of literature by indigenous Pacific island writers that is critical of traditional socio-political structures. Her analysis is undertaken "in the spirit of criticism now being promoted" by those writers, whose approach stands in sharp contrast to the anti-colonial critiques that shaped an earlier generation of writing and that often led to over-romanticised views of indigenous political systems. Many of these critical writers, she notes, are from Tonga, "the most rigidly authoritarian and hierarchical society in the region" (p. 6). But Pacific islander accounts are by no means uniform and, as evident in this study, there are some strong ideological defenders of tradition amongst Pacific island scholars. This is also a debate being engaged in by non-Pacific island scholars and, in this context, Lawson draws attention to the insider/outsider divide, arguing (not surprisingly) that "insider" accounts should not be immune from "outsider" critiques.

The book has four substantive chapters and a short introduction and conclusion. The first chapter provides a lengthy survey of the theory of tradition, traditionalism, and democracy. It is here that the principal arguments of the study, described above, are presented. This is followed by three case studies: Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. The chapter on Fiji, which draws on and develops the author's earlier work on the failure of democracy in Fiji, deals mainly with constitutional developments

since the military coups of 1987.[1] It examines, in particular, the arguments for the 1990 constitution, which entrenches ethnic Fijian political dominance and a strict communal electoral system, and the effects of this constitution on party and electoral politics.

Lawson argues, as she has elsewhere, that the claims that Fijian rights were threatened under the 1970 constitution were "self-servingly false," in that they "disguised" the real motivation behind the coups and the 1990 constitution, which was "the attempted consolidation of chiefly authority" (p. 75). She argues that the constitution has not proved to be a recipe for stability; nor does it ensure the long-term grip on power by Fijian chiefs. In fact, since its promulgation, the power of non-chiefs appears to have strengthened. There has also been a further fragmentation of Fijian unity. This is due to the effect of relegating Fiji Indians politically, which has weakened "an important rallying point of the old chiefly establishment" (p. 69).

The chapter on Tonga focuses on the rise of the pro-democracy movement, although this is preceded by a lengthy overview of the political history of the country beginning with the pre-contact era. This case study perhaps fits most closely with the arguments put forward in the first chapter. Drawing on interviews, as well as news commentary and the scholarly work of Tongan writers, Lawson traces the origins of the "reformist challenge" in the 1970s and 80s in Tonga. The pro-democracy movement sought to draw attention to blatant abuse of privilege by Tonga's ruling elite. It succeeded in introducing into public debate issues never before discussed, while exposing contradictions within the conservative, traditional elite—whose reverence for Tongan culture and tradition seemed limited to its usefulness in retaining their powerful positions.

Tonga's pro-democracy movement challenged not only the traditional political structures but also deeply embedded political and cultural values that sustained them: values seen as increasingly anachronistic and at odds with the requirements of good government. Traditionalism has been utilised by the conservative elites as a weapon to resist reform, capitalising on the strength of residual support amongst Tongans for the present system and loyalty for the royal family.

The final case study is Western Samoa, where the focus is the introduction of universal suffrage in 1990. Here it is argued by Lawson that traditional political structures (embodied in the *matai* system) have been preserved by introducing democratisation in a controlled and limited

way. The threat posed to the *matai* system came from a proliferating number of *matai* title holders. The incentive to become a *matai* was the fact that only *matai* were eligible to stand for election and could vote. The aim of introducing universal suffrage, while restricting eligibility for election to *matai*, was to reduce the number of claims to *matai* status. Lawson highlights the way both proponents and opponents of universal suffrage utilised traditionalism in support of their positions, arguing that the ultimate goal for both sides was preservation of the Samoan Way.

In this context, Western democratic values had little influence or perceived merit. In fact, the Samoan Way was regarded as democratic in its own right, especially since, in theory, all were eligible to be considered for a *matai* title. The reality and the irony, according to Lawson, was that universal suffrage encouraged a much more repressive tendency in Samoan politics, especially with the enactment in 1990 of the Village Fono Act. Designed to be a form of compensation to those defenders of the status quo, this legislation strengthened the authority of the village *matai* council or *fono*, allowing it to impose rules and punishment along customary lines.

In her conclusion, Lawson draws out some of the ambivalent attitudes toward democracy revealed in her study of the three South Pacific countries. She argues that such ambivalence generally reflects a defense of domestic elite interests against both external and domestic challenges. It is suggested that the insider/outsider divide serves as a convenient device for those opposing change who may seek to discredit criticism by labelling it anti-traditional and an attack on state sovereignty. In this context, Lawson warns that the Orientalist critique—which exposed the misconceptions and biases of Western descriptions of non-Western societies—was in danger of being “appropriated for the purpose of promoting an inverted dichotomy of the same misguided proportions ... in the service of autocratic indigenous elites” (p. 173).

This book contributes to a number of contemporary debates: the meaning and role of tradition; the universality and variations of democracy; the nature and bases of good government. These are debates of importance to the future of the Pacific island states covered here, as well as to more general political analyses. It is therefore a timely and significant book. Each country is treated in great detail and current political developments are put in their

historical context. This provides a useful reference book for students of contemporary Pacific island politics. But this is also a provocative book, and its interpretation of politics in the three countries covered—within the given theoretical framework—is bound to raise comment and be subject to criticism. It will no doubt appear to some to be an over-reductionist interpretation that does not lend itself to a sympathetic or sensitive treatment of the dilemmas and complexities inherent in each of the three countries. These dilemmas are particularly acute in Fiji, where political stability is contingent on balancing a number of seemingly contradictory demands: basic human rights for all, special guarantees for Fijian rights, national economic development, and good government. In all three countries there is a tension between retaining traditional structures and meeting future development goals.

It is questionable, in this context, to single out a particular class of hereditary elites for criticism. Societies caught up in the inexorable processes of change are bound to encounter conflict—between the old and the new, the winners and the losers, the local and the global. Tradition becomes a defence mechanism not only for the privileged elite, but for a broader section of society unable to benefit from change or disempowered by change.

There are many imponderables thrown up by this book, which is perhaps one of its most provocative and important aspects. How unique/how transferable are Western concepts of democracy? What is the basis of political legitimacy in non-Western societies? To what extent can democracy grow in a different way to that of the West? When is it acceptable to depart from international norms and standards of democracy and human rights? It is likely that these questions will continue to shape debate on Pacific island politics for a long time to come, and Lawson’s book will be an essential part of this debate.

Notes

[1]. Stephanie Lawson, *The Failure of Democratic Politics in Fiji* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

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