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The morning after I finished reading Stephanie Lawson's *Tradition versus Democracy in the South Pacific*, the *New York Times* ran an article concerning current Maori activism in Auckland, dwelling in particular on a sledgehammer attack upon the America's Cup. The accompanying photograph, spread across three columns, showed a solidly built young Maori in traditional attire, brandishing a carved staff at an older man in a business suit. The caption set the scene on the Waitangi Treaty grounds, where a wedding was underway, and explained that "a relative of the groom offered a traditional challenge to the father of the bride" (*New York Times*, 20 March 1997:A4).

Discussing the article in class, my students, who receive a later edition than the one delivered to me, immediately pointed out that in their copies the photo had been cropped, deleting both the bride's father and the additional commentary that the father "took a few steps forward and was then welcomed."

This excision struck me as mirroring the point of view Lawson brings to bear on questions of democracy and tradition in the Pacific. Our attention is drawn to a fierce greeting while we are led to ignore the warm hospitality that ordinarily follows it. In her examination of the sociopolitical precedents that have shaped Pacific Islanders' responses to European-imposed political institutions, Lawson finds little that might be described as receptive to democracy. She thus concludes that shortcomings in the ways new island nation-states adopt Western-style political values and institutions are mainly the result of local predispositions to social relations less egalitarian and participatory than those of the powers that impose these institutions upon them.

Throughout the island Pacific, formal ceremonies often include not only acknowledgements of political rank and prestations of food and floral garlands, but also performances that are decidedly martial in character. This amalgam of agonistic display and warm hospitality reflects the duality of foreign relations as they have evolved in Pacific Islands societies over millennia spent adapting to life in these particularly vulnerable environments. Island dwellers have reason to fear that others, displaced from their home islands by a range of phenomena (including storms and overpopulation) might seek in turn to displace them; at the same time, they also recognize that only their hospitality to those who have already been uprooted is likely to ensure them aid in bad times.<sup>1</sup> Performances of various kinds, including rhetorical flourishes but especially dance, are capable of transmitting the sorts of mixed messages that effectively communicate this ambivalence, informing outsiders simultaneously about a group's ability to defend itself and its willingness to be cooperative (Petersen 1992a).<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, virtually all Pacific island communities maintain systems of social rank, regardless of the degree to which any sort of rank is actually acknowledged in everyday behavior. In the process of convincing outsiders of one's ability to defend oneself, people are likely to find that some manifestation of hierarchical political organization is almost indispensable; this does not mean, however, that people in these societies necessarily want to be burdened with the costs of putting up with formidable leaders on an everyday basis. In short, the existence of hierarchical political values and institutions in a given society does not tell us, a priori, much about their nature or about the circumstances in which they are brought to bear upon pressing strategic and tactical problems.

Having said this, I am prepared to argue that, with a few possible exceptions, Pacific Islands societies have been as likely to demonstrate aspects of democratic political processes as any in the world. Obviously, these communities have been engaged in continual social change and have at some times been more authoritarian than at others. I am not suggesting that their citizens are all paragons of virtue, but rather that they have pursued the same sorts of political struggles and dealt with the same contradictions that all societies confront. All of them seem to have placed high values on decentralization and political participation; attempts at centralization seem to have been resisted, if not always successfully. It is in the commitment to small-scale, face-to-face, and intensely participatory government that I find this democratic character most fully revealed.

Lawson examines the contemporary workings of government in Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa. She seeks to demonstrate that “traditionalist emphasis” on chiefs, monarchy, and *matai* in these three Pacific Islands societies, respectively, enhances and enforces the continuing rule of elites. “The concept of tradition,” she says, “is one of the most important components of an ideological arsenal which has been used to counter the development of more democratic norms of political conduct and organization.” In her view, indigenous claims about the continuing significance of tradition serve largely to preserve elite power and privilege against claims to “more extensive opportunities for participation” on the part of “those without traditionally derived political or social status” (p. 5).

Lawson couples an appreciation for classical political theory with keen powers of observation. She grounds her analyses upon sophisticated judgments concerning the relationships between that which members of various island societies say is going on and that which a range of competent scholars have reported regarding what actually seems to be taking place. It is difficult to quarrel with a good many of her assertions and interpretations. “Tradition,” as Pacific Islanders sometimes employ it in the course of European-bashing, does indeed have something in common with the “patriotism” Samuel Johnson called the last refuge of scoundrels.

My regard for the quality of Lawson’s work, however, does not compel my concurrence with her basic themes in this volume. I have two fundamental disagreements with her approach. First, her perspective on the political dynamics of indigenous Pacific Islands societies does not capture their participatory character and it thus substantially exaggerates the authoritarian aspects of chieftainship. Second, her renderings of democratic theory underestimate the degree to which work in this area inherently and irresolvably contests the nature of democracy, and it undervalues the emphasis much of this theory places upon participation as essential to the life of suc-

cessful democratic politics. Both of these issues are as relevant to questions concerning the uneasy relations between democracy and tradition in the rest of the Pacific as they are to the specifics of the cases Lawson dissects, and it is these broader themes, rather than the details of her case studies, that I wish to address here. Because my own firsthand experience with these matters lies in Micronesia, I shall draw particularly upon Micronesian examples.

Underlying Lawson's treatment is a misapprehension about the presence and character of participatory politics as a key element in the dynamics of chieftainship. Arguing that "a substantial part of the history of democratic development in the West has been about depersonalizing political power, and vesting it in impersonal institutions," she contrasts the politics in her case studies as marked by "a much stronger personalized element in the assertion of tradition since its most authoritative bearers are those whose status is largely (although not exclusively) ascribed" (p. 12). Yet it is clear that in these Polynesian societies, as in Micronesia, the most politically salient aspects of ascription are commonly seen in the manipulation (or selective reinterpretation) of genealogies after the fact of succession to a chiefly title. Indeed, I have had chiefs explain to me that much of clanship's viability lies precisely in the broad net of men it makes eligible for titles. A number of ethnographies describe situations in which it is obvious that ascription—local claims to the contrary notwithstanding—is not the most salient factor in access to titles (Alkire 1989:44–46; Kiste 1974:52; Petersen 1982). Lawson makes the error of granting credence to post facto claims, which in fact tend to legitimize rather than prescribe succession.

On the other hand, she also dismisses as little more than instrumentalist maneuvering the claims put forward by elites about their rights to run things, that is, "the manipulation of tradition by indigenous elites in ways that enhance their own legitimacy by sanctifying the political order to which they owe their privilege" (p. 12). Again, I see several problems with this portrayal. While it is certainly accurate in some senses, it is also a basic truism of social life that is hardly peculiar to Pacific Islands politics; her assertions evoke Jeremy Bentham's powerful diatribe against "malefactors in high places" for whom "preservation of order is but keeping things in the state they are in: preservation of good order is keeping things in that state which, in proportion as it is good for the preservers, is bad for every body else" (Bentham 1995:112). Moreover, Lawson's analysis seems to indicate that the operation of political dynamics works only to justify the status quo and rarely, if ever, constitutes a basic part of daily social life in communities full of people trying to get things done. She finds it problematic (p. 17) that "'traditionalism' can emerge and take on an explicitly ideological character that lends itself readily to instrumental manipulation" and that "tradition exhorts its partici-

pants to an attitude of reverence and duty toward the practices and values that have been transmitted from the past” (though it should be noted that in passing she does cite Bronwen Douglas to the effect that traditional ideologies can provide alternative strategies for political action). This echoes much too closely those classic political-science attitudes describing “traditional society, in which vast masses live an unpolitical life, embedded in customs and usages they need not understand” (Merkl 1967:208). Anyone who has spent much time in island societies knows how difficult it is to identify many unpolitical lives.

Lawson’s position is, I think, the consequence of a perspective that over-emphasizes the place of institutions in political life. In this approach, “democracy” is mostly about government. Yet, democracy is more appropriately—or at least more productively—understood as something considerably more extensive than a type of government. Sheldon Wolin, who has devoted his distinguished career to the exploration of democratic politics, maintains that “democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government” (1996:43). James Kloppenberg insists that “democracy is not now, nor has it ever been, primarily a question of representative institutions” and suggests instead that it be “conceived as a way of life rather than a way simply of managing conflict and preserving order” (1995:176).

When Lawson does tackle the issue of just what it is that constitutes democracy, she acknowledges that the gap between theory and practice “is just as problematic in the West where democratic institutions have largely failed to deliver on the promise of greater equality for the mass of ordinary people” (p. 27). If this is indeed the case (and I certainly believe that it is), then it seems to me her entire argument founders. She wants us to believe that it is the predisposition of Pacific Islands political cultures toward personalized and authoritarian government and the instrumentalist manipulations of modern-day elites that prevent these societies from reaping the fruits of democratic institutions introduced by their erstwhile colonial rulers. But if the societies in which this Western political form has arisen cannot properly or fully implement it, then why are we blaming defects in the societies where it has been subsequently introduced for faults that appear to be inherent in the form itself?

I think Lawson is mistaken in implying—or perhaps I am merely arguing that we should not infer—that such shortcomings derive from flaws inherent in these societies. It is in the nature of democracy, whatever it is, that in practice it must be incomplete. Graeme Duncan opens his introduction to a searching critique of modern political life, *Democratic Theory and Practice*, by observing, “Democratic practice throws a dark light on democratic theory,” and continues, “Democracy is a rare and desirable political form, vulnerable in theory and practice and always incomplete in certain respects” (1983:3).

In this context, I find myself standing with Albert Hirschman:

In these days of universal celebration of the democratic model, it may seem churlish to dwell on deficiencies in the functioning of Western democracies. But it is precisely the spectacular and exhilarating crumbling of certain walls that calls attention to those that remain intact or to rifts that deepen. Among them there is one that can frequently be found in the more advanced democracies: the systematic lack of communication between groups of citizens. (1991:ix)

It is precisely because the organization of daily life in most Pacific Islands communities fosters an overwhelming amount of communication among groups of citizens that Lawson's position troubles me. She is particularly unhappy with "claims of the 'democracy-as-indigenous' kind" and the question of whether the island nations have "pre-existing democratic traditions that can provide a better basis for contemporary political institutions than those imported from the West" (pp. 27-28). She explicitly denies this possibility, however, insisting "those principles that first gave democracy pride of place as the most desirable form of government are largely absent in the political practice" of the countries she examines (p. 30). She rails against "what some defenders of non-democratic systems in the South Pacific have done in promoting the validity of indigenous traditions against Western ideas about democracy" (p. 34). In sum, Lawson maintains, it is specious to defend the political practices of these societies on grounds either that they entail indigenous forms of democratic action or that they have the right to pursue their own political destinies regardless of what Westerners think best for them.

Lloyd Fallers assayed much of this same terrain in exploring what he called the "politics of equality," in his contribution to that classic of political development studies, *Old Societies and New States*, and elsewhere. Fallers contrasted forms of social stratification found in the new African states with the class systems characteristic of European societies, pointing out that in Africa rights in land were in the charge of kin and local groupings and "thus, tendencies toward crystallization of rigid horizontal strata were checked" (1963:180). As a consequence, African struggles for equality have differed markedly from the familiar outlines of European social history. His conclusions foreshadow much that Lawson describes. We can substitute Pacific Islands attitudes toward outside interference in local political matters, for instance, when he observes, "The politics of equality, and indeed such political self-awareness of any kind that may be said to transcend the boundaries of the traditional societies, have thus far consisted in the main of the assertion of the dignity of things generically African, as against Western domina-

tion" (*ibid.*:216–217). But Fallers found it equally the case that local African societies have demonstrated their own means of promoting equality. Because of this, "In most African kingdoms, kinship groups have played a much greater role in diffusing authority" (Fallers 1959:32). "In traditional Africa, even in the larger kingdoms with their elaborate political hierarchies, a kind of egalitarianism" remains rooted in kin and family relations (Fallers 1963:180). This commitment to important aspects of equality, however, is compromised when foreign political institutions are grafted onto local practices: "With the achievement of independence, there emerges the problem of finding or creating structures within the social fabric of the various states in terms of which to channel the politics of equality" (*ibid.*:217).<sup>3</sup>

In this context, the key element in Fallers's phrase "politics of equality" is politics. Active political life simultaneously promotes and works to resolve tensions between equality and tradition, as well as between hierarchical authority and tradition. Lawson is inclined to overlook the politics of equality as a consequence of her emphasis on inequalities; she might do well to consider Sherry Ortner's remonstrance against "the lack of an adequate sense of prior and ongoing politics among subalterns" (1995:179)—that is, the tendency to ignore or overlook ongoing internal struggles and resultant political skills that peoples bring to their dealings with those who oppress them. The unfortunate corollary, Ortner notes, is that critiques of this tendency may direct us toward entirely antithetical errors. Many now find it difficult "to look at even the simplest society ever again without seeing a politics every bit as complex, and sometimes every bit as oppressive, as those of capitalism and colonialism" (*ibid.*:179).

In the course of these struggles, individuals employ different versions of tradition or inscribe alternate histories. We can speak of "contested" interpretations or "off-the-shelf" traditions—versions that can be dusted off and used as the occasion and context demand (Petersen 1995a, 1992b).

Lawson notes that people do use "tradition" to serve current political purposes in the same way that they use "history." Indeed, she provides a cogent discussion of the fundamental ways in which these societies' uses of tradition run parallel to other societies' uses of history (pp. 12–13). Yet it is in fact widely appreciated that history is not only written by the victors, but that it is continually being rewritten by both winners and losers. As Eickelman and Piscatori observe in their recent work on Muslim politics, "Religious scholars, in particular, take upon themselves the role of defending tradition, but in fact they utilize it as a means to power and control" (1996:55). "The fact that proponents of credos, beliefs, or ideologies may assert that their values and visions are timeless and immemorial," they continue, "should not obscure the fact that they are subject to constant modification and change" (*ibid.*:69).

The real issue, then, is not so much a matter of whether indigenous democratic forms are to be found in these societies as it is the ability of local elites of one stripe or another to dominate political life in them. This is what truly provokes Lawson, I think. In Fiji, it is the eastern chiefs who have usurped control; in Tonga, it is a monarchy that stifles essential freedoms; and in Samoa, it is the privileged place of the *matai* that undermines equality.

In each of these cases there are abuses, to be sure. “Utopia,” after all, means “nowhere.” The important questions are whether the existence of these problems can be read as unequivocal (or at least thoroughly convincing) evidence that democracy is effectively absent from these societies and, if so, whether this is the consequence of indigenous obstacles to its survival.

This is a problem familiar to those with an appreciation of Micronesia’s modern history. Each of the successive colonial regimes that took over administration of the various archipelagoes argued in turn that its task was both to overcome indigenous backwardness and to eradicate inappropriate and even harmful practices introduced by their immediate colonial predecessors (the Spaniards were intent on overcoming apostasies introduced by the Protestant missionaries operating outside the Marianas). When the United States, paragon of democratic virtue that it represents itself to be, took over, there was a degree of ambivalence about indigenous practices. Some thought the islanders should be left to their own devices (the so-called zoo theory, often attributed to anthropologists but more common among one strain of the navy’s civil-affairs officers) while others—decidedly in the majority—urged the immediate “development” of American political institutions.<sup>4</sup>

It seems fairly apparent to me that those charged with most closely examining the character of Micronesian political institutions in the immediate postwar years—that is, the anthropologists sent out in the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA) and related projects—were also divided in their appreciation of Micronesian political life. Before he ever reached Micronesia, George Peter Murdock (who organized and directed CIMA) wrote that the islands’ “feudal,” even “primitive political tradition,” assured the failure of any attempt to “impose” representative government, concluding that “all in all, the interest of the inhabitants (and incidentally, the best interests of the United States) would be best served by establishing in most of these islands a strong but benevolent government—a government paternalistic in character, but one which ruled as indirectly as possible.” The memo called for complete naval control over the area “on a permanent or at least semi-permanent basis” (quoted in Richard 1957, 1:18–19; cf. Bashkow 1991:180–181).

It was Murdock who convinced the navy of the “‘pressing need’ for information relevant to island government,” given “the obscurity of the native



system of land tenure and the scarcity of knowledge concerning the political and social structure of native communities” (Bashkow 1991:185). After he had conducted his portion of the CIMA ethnographic research in Chuuk, Murdock concluded that he had found “small feudal states with an elaborate class structure” nearly everywhere in Micronesia and that they were in the process of evolving in Chuuk and nearby islands. He said he had seen “‘on the hoof,’ so to speak, a process of state development and class formation” (Murdock 1965:245–247). His suggestion (Murdock 1948) that Micronesian societies should be transformed into modern democracies is a logical, if unperceptive, consequence of this outlook.

Elsewhere I have explored similar—as well as diametrically opposite—perspectives manifested by a number of other anthropologists (Petersen 1999). Questions of whether Micronesians, or other Pacific Islands peoples, need to radically alter their political behavior in order to become democrats would seem to turn largely on whether their practices were adjudged democratic in the first place.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Burrows and Spiro, two participants in the CIMA project, best express the point of view directly contrary to Murdock’s: “In form the government of Ifaluk is strictly aristocratic. In practice it is quite democratic, in the sense that every individual gets a chance to express his opinion and can make sure that it will be heard and considered by those in power. . . . The government of the United States, in form, is strictly democratic. In practice, as all citizens seem to agree, it falls far short of that ideal” (Burrows and Spiro 1970:198).

They go on to argue that if democracy in practice is what the United States aims for, there is simply no need to make changes in Ifaluk’s traditional form of government and that there are in fact extremely good reasons militating against American attempts to foster such changes (*ibid.*:198–199).

There are, of course, significant differences between Ifaluk and the substantially larger Polynesian societies Lawson considers. It nonetheless remains the case that the degree to which an outsider deems any of these polities democratic is closely related to the issue of whether the outsider believes substantial changes are necessary in order for that polity to achieve according to the standards of democratic theorists.<sup>6</sup>

There are, to be sure, many important differences among Micronesian societies and nation-states, just as there are an array of differences between them and the societies Lawson studies. But the issue at hand plays a role in all these societies. All are characterized by significant indigenous forms of hierarchical relations—more intensively developed in some cases, less so in others. But in each case there are equally well-developed forms of checks and balances, the most notable being the importance of landholding and titleholding corporate kinship groups. Writing as an American and with

reference to former American colonies, I tend to trace the relevant historical trajectory back to the drafting of the American constitution. But as Pocock (1975), and more recently Maier (1997) and Rakove (1996), have emphasized, the American constitution and the revolution that preceded it were dramatically influenced by Machiavelli's analyses of republics and republican politics interpreted via James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1992), with its oblique seventeenth-century commentaries on the English revolutions and the English Declaration of Rights. The men who shaped early American political institutions were struggling to adapt a body of political theory to the very specific political conditions brought about by decolonization and the advent of independence. This is no more and no less than the former British Commonwealth colonies and American trusteeship colonies have been engaged in. What George Mason, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and their colleagues seized upon was the important role property-owning could and would play in formulating a viable set of checks and balances. This was not property-owning in the sense of capitalist accumulation, but in Fallers's sense: the *raison d'être* of groups capable of checking "tendencies toward crystallization of rigid horizontal strata" (1963:180). Pacific Islands peoples still look toward kin groups for similar protections from the state.

In all her cases there are more complex processes, and more conscious political action, than Lawson seems to think. I am by no means suggesting that tradition and democracy are synonymous in Pacific Islands political cultures, but any work that is framed in terms of tradition versus democracy is apt to misunderstand a great deal of contemporary political life in the region. Despite the relative magnitude of most Pacific Islands nation-states' bureaucracies, their governments are not particularly oppressive. This must in some measure be attributed to a widespread indigenous commitment to participatory politics—that is, traditional democracy.

## NOTES

1. This sentiment is hardly peculiar to islanders. The eighth century B.C. Greek poet Hesiod, observing a necessary degree of tension among neighbors, instructed his brother Perses that it was proper for a man to respect his equals but also to be sensitive to slights, balancing healthy rivalry with fair dealings. "He had to be tough but welcoming, because either too much or too little trust would ruin him" (Morris 1996:28).

2. Full-scale receptions of diplomats in most countries include military displays, and visiting heads of state are required to inspect military units.

3. Basil Davidson argues clearly and cogently that independence was granted only when Africans agreed to saddle themselves with these imposed political institutions (1992).

4. Some American leaders wanted to do both.

5. In examining the politics of constitutional arguments rooted in the notion of “original intent”—that is, attempts to conjure up the original meanings of passages in the United States Constitution—Jack Rakove acknowledges that while he generally objects to such arguments, “I happen to like originalist arguments when the weight of the evidence seems to support the constitutional outcomes I favor” (1996: xv).

6. A respectful attitude toward indigenous political practices is sometimes dismissed as romantic Rousseauian naïveté (Petersen 1995b). But the outlook has a venerable American pedigree. Thomas Nairne, who lived with the Chickasaws in what is now Mississippi in the early 1700s, wrote, “Plato nor no other writer of Politicks even of the most republican principles, could ever contrive a Government where the equality of mankind is more justly observed than here among the savages” (quoted in Nobles 1997: 36). In his *History of the American Indians*, originally published in 1775, James Adair wrote of the Cherokee that

[t]he power of their chiefs is an empty sound. They can only persuade or dissuade the people, either by force of good-nature and clear reasoning, or colouring things, so as to suit their prevailing passions. . . . When any national affair is in debate, you may hear every father of a family speaking in his house on the subject, with rapid bold language, and the utmost freedom that a people can use. Their voices, to a man, have due weight in every public affair, as it concerns their welfare alike. . . . And their whole behaviour, on public occasions, is highly worthy of imitation by some of our British senators and lawyers. (Adair 1960: 109–110)

This perspective was shared by Lewis Henry Morgan (whom many consider the founder of American anthropology). In his 1876 review of H. H. Bancroft’s *The Native Races of the Pacific States*, subtitled “An Essay on the Tribal Society of North American Indians,” Morgan tackled the issue more generally, insisting that “[l]iberty, equality and fraternity, though never formulated, were cardinal principles” in native American societies. “The institutions of the Iroquois,” for example, “were essentially democratized—a fact that will ultimately be found true of every tribe and confederacy of the American aborigines” (Morgan 1950: 24, 29).

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