

## RITUAL AND OTHER FORMS OF SOCIAL ACTION

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### *Preliminary Remarks*

Ever since Émile Durkheim's studies of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), cultic practices, that is, ritual practices, have been the objects of concept formation not only in the study of religion but in the social sciences as well. It is worth noting that Durkheim preferred to talk of the "religious life" rather than religion and that he selected as his paradigm a culture far removed from and quite alien to Western civilization, namely the world of the Australian aborigines (as described by ethnographic literature). Religious life encompasses far more than the body of beliefs and interpretation of a specific doctrine of salvation. It is, in Durkheim's words, the source of all "major social institutions" and a means to implement social cohesion.<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that much has changed in the world since Durkheim's time and thus in the sciences of society, man, and culture. Nonetheless, this has in no way made Durkheim's insights—which are part and parcel of any history of the scientific reconstruction of ritual—irrelevant. Taking up these insights in the self-critical reflection of contemporary scientific discourse can certainly guard research against one-sided culturalist ascriptions or positivist traps. For the thesis that *ritual* is responsible for the constitution of specific forms of social solidarity<sup>2</sup> is certainly a product of the modern conceptual world. Moreover, it is a thesis that can be empirically

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A German version of this article has been published in D. Harth and G.J. Schenk (eds), *Ritualdynamik—Kulturübergreifende Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte rituellen Handelns* (Heidelberg, 2004, 95–113).

<sup>1</sup> É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) (New York, 1965), 466.

<sup>2</sup> In *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (New York, London, 1978), 213, T. Parsons describes ritual, in a passage on Durkheim, as a device for producing social solidarity.

corroborated in terms of the symbolic politics of those wielders of power who compete for influence over the hearts and minds of our contemporaries. For a long time now salvational doctrines have no longer been restricted to churches and denominations; they are also found in the programs and activities of political religions (in Eric Voegelin's sense),<sup>3</sup> in *civil religion*, and in the promises of happiness of those sectarian cultural revolutions which, in the name of a rather narrow-minded idea of purity, misuse cultural differences as a political weapon. In all the cases cited, ritual options boom, since they are very well suited for couching claims to power within society in terms of the medium of symbolic action. For this allows the translation of the imagination-based contents of these secular religions into something visible, while actually hiding these contents. It does not make any difference here whether these secular religions adopt old ritual traditions, combine them in a new way, or simply quote them for propaganda purposes. For in this context 'ritual' means getting beyond mere conventions—in the sense of institutional continuity—in order to invent a program of symbolic action that aims at reproducibility, which gives the performer the satisfaction of renewing the meaning (*Sinn*) of his or her collectively shared world in the performance he or she enacts.

In the investigation of contemporary uses of language, however, it is almost impossible to detect a binding, usage-regulating correlation between the term 'ritual' and the forms of religious and pseudo-religious practice. This holds for all European languages that have borrowed *ritus* from the Latin and adapted it to their own morphologies. For this reason I shall use here and in the following the adjectival form as a noun 'the ritual' (*das Rituelle*)<sup>4</sup> in order to designate a distinctive, though not yet defined property of forms of action that is found in both well-formed ritual practice and in the open modus of ritualized social action. Whether this refers only to something formal in character, as dictionary entries imply, or, posed more generally, to the question of what the ritual (*das Rituelle*) is cannot be stated at this point. The aim of the following essay is, first of all, to learn something about the semantic range of the current

<sup>3</sup> E. Voegelin, *Die politischen Religionen* (1938) (München, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: This distinction is not readily available in English, since the adjectival and substantive forms are both 'ritual'.

scientific concepts of ritual—through a critical reading of specific examples from academic language games, particularly those of the social and cultural sciences (which today are practically indistinguishable)—in order to be able to draw theoretically useful conclusions. It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that there is no such thing as the *one and only* socio-cultural world, and thus there is nothing exclusively unequivocal in the concrete use of the terms. On the contrary, there are as many worlds as there are meaning-constituting and internally meaningful theoretical languages. And even this claim holds only in relation to those terms of reference created by the organization of science within one's own culture.

If one considers ritual action as a variant of social action, and this is in fact one of the premises of the arguments articulated here, then one cannot avoid deploying some of the basic conceptual building blocks of sociological action theories.

### *The Ambiguity of Social Action*

It is practically impossible to distinguish the ritual (*das Rituelle*) from social action.<sup>5</sup> For if one follows Max Weber, social action is nothing but a “meaningful (*sinnhafte*) orientation of one's own action to that of the action of an other”.<sup>6</sup> Social action, if it is to be distinct from mere behavior, is always constituted in terms of norms and meaning that, according to our definition, also hold for ritual praxis.<sup>7</sup> But this is exactly what is disputed by anthropologists. According to one widely discussed thesis, rituals are “pure activities” without meaning, purpose, or usefulness, or, at the very least, lacking in intentional meaning.<sup>8</sup> It seems to me that a basic ambiguity in the concept of action per se is responsible for this contradiction.

<sup>5</sup> For Edmund Leach, the ritual (*das Rituelle*) is a property of social action per se since it encompasses the communicative and expressive functions of ‘behavior’; cf. Leach 1968, 520–526.

<sup>6</sup> M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen, 5th ed., 1972), 11.

<sup>7</sup> The constitutive interrelation between the norm-, meaning-, and rule-bound character of social action forms the foundation of an essay in basic theory by U. Oevermann, “Regelgeleitetes Handeln, Normativität und Lebenspraxis. Zur Konstitutionstheorie der Sozialwissenschaften”, in J. Link, T. Loer, and H. Neuendorff (eds), *‘Normalität’ im Diskursnetz soziologischer Begriffe* (Heidelberg, 2003), 183–217.

<sup>8</sup> Staal 1979.—Some theories deny that ritual action has any intentional meaning

If one stays clear of all solipsistic conceptions, then every action makes use of impersonal forms—that is, conventional or traditional patterns of action—but in the performance of the act itself is at the same time a factor of invention and change. In the radical version advanced by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: “Every action is a creative project”.<sup>9</sup> This is a reversal of the teleological view in which action is interpreted, to the extent that it is not anomic, as the unquestioned fulfillment of a pre-given plan, a preconceived intention, a carefully considered project, a set rule. For this reason the postulated orientation towards meaning (*Sinnorientierung*) should not be understood as if the actor were always the master of his or her actions. Rather, he or she is *carried along* by the action, which develops its own inner dynamics, an experience whose uncanny sides have aroused fascination in literature from Sophocles’ *Oedipus* to the heroes of Kafka’s novels. It may also be an experience to which that paradox of intentionless intentionality applies which Humphrey and Laidlaw seek to place at the foundation of ritual action.<sup>10</sup> However, there is nothing in this heteronomous definition of action that would distinguish the ritual (*das Rituelle*) from the social as such. It points instead to something very general, a dimension that is not at the actor’s disposal, one that may explain why, in the midst of the performance of any given action, the actor’s own workings can never be entirely transparent to him- or herself and why actors are never capable of naming all the normative and meaning-constituting factors that condition their actions. In sociology this thesis has gained recognition above all in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who nevertheless would not like to deny that even seemingly random action possesses an immanent rationality.<sup>11</sup> The impression that *something*

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whatsoever. Careful discussion of this standpoint can be found in Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 93, where the following definition is given: “Intentional meaning is not what someone intended to do before doing it, but what they understood themselves to be doing as they did it, their reflexive understanding of their conduct which is constitutive of the action as action.”

<sup>9</sup> J.-P. Sartre, *Cahiers pour une morale* (Paris, 1983), 524. Cf. also H. Joas, *Die Kreativität des Handelns* (Frankfurt a. M., 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 99: “In ritual you both are and are not the author of your acts.”

<sup>11</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris, 1980), 85: “Il y a une *économie des pratiques*, c’est-à-dire une raison immanente aux pratiques, qui ne trouve son ‘origine’ ni dans les ‘décisions’ de la raison comme calcul conscient ni dans les déterminations de mécanismes extérieurs et supérieurs aux agents.”

happens to you while you act, is thus comparable to the utterance of a statement whose beginning was consciously chosen by the speaker but whose meaningful organization and semantic-pragmatic aim can first be established or assessed on a metacommunicative level after completion of the performance. Herein lies a basic indeterminacy of practice for the actors, an indeterminacy that was already reflected in the oldest theories of action. On the one hand, this indeterminacy grants action a potential scope and leeway; on the other, it encumbers it with incalculable risks. At the same time, the process of action cannot be undone after the fact; its consequences are irreversible.

This aporia, whose traditional lines of development in theory are reconstructed by Hannah Arendt in the fifth chapter of her great work *The Human Condition* (1958), marks the threshold that anyone who chooses to participate in the social world must cross. Decisive here is the insight into the constitutive conditions of action, an insight closely connected to this aporia. For it is not only that each individual's capacity for action is formed in the framework of social processes (socialization). The ability to anticipate the expectations of others in order to minimize not only the risks of indeterminacy but also the heteronomy of the action situation is the result of concerted social efforts. To put it in positive terms: this anticipatory competence that allows one to maximize the chances of autonomous decisions in action is also the result of concerted interactive efforts within society.

#### *An Aside on Ethical Questions*

The question now arises as to whether it is the recognition of the implied heteronomous sides of social action that first requires the solidarity with the other that is associated with the predicate of ethically 'good' action. This predicate refers, of course, to a normative framework that signals that 'good' action is not something that can be taken for granted. This brings us face to face with the ambivalence of the norm of solidarity, which the formality of the ritual (*das Rituelle*) can in no way change. For—contrary to what Durkheim apparently still imagined—the ritual (*das Rituelle*) is in no way a reliable guarantee for a solidarity that in a moral sense is something positive. One need call to mind only the readiness, ritually induced under conditions of tyranny, to sacrifice individual freedom to the

idol of collective will—or, put in another way, to practice a solidarity of blind allegiance. Perhaps this provides a negative example for the fact that the concept of action consists of more than the mere implementation of established rules of order. If the strict adherence to such rules of order is involved, we tend to view it as a case of normatively regulated modes of behavior that fall under custom, convention, or morality, where violations are punished with sanctions. In any event, the question of the (culturally specific) criteria of ‘good’ action is relevant, which is in fact obvious since the problem of moral judgment is in no way separable from the definition of the concept of action. This interrelation appears to be repressed in the scientific literature on ritual action; for example, in the work of Victor Turner, who often reinterprets the clear use of force in some ritual practices in the sense of a blind justification of social violence, according to which the condition for the successful passage from one form to another form of organization of collective social life lies in the ritually staged physical humiliation of the individual.

For this reason ritual action as social type is in no way free of the ambiguity of action in society referred to above. Quite the contrary: ritual and the use of force go together all too often, and the symbolic aspect of the ritual (*das Rituelle*) seems to be conducive in these cases to the combination of ritual and force, something that can be described as the shifting of the perpetrator’s culpability to a third party that exerts imperatives—to a god, honor, country, cultural purity, and so on. Ritual abuse of children, ritualized torture, so-called honor killings to reestablish the clan’s purity of blood, and not least acts of war make up the great terror scenario of a very contemporary *negative* ritualism,<sup>12</sup> not to mention the fact that hardly any forms of ritualization are more exaggerated than those destructive practices employed by political tyranny in order to come to power and its bombastic practices of self-presentation as public spectacle.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I use the term ‘ritualism’ in the sense of an ideological overdetermination of ritual and ritualized forms of action. See J.R. Noblitt and P.S. Perskin, *Cult and Ritual Abuse: Its History, Anthropology, and Recent Discovery in Contemporary America* (Boulder, rev. ed., 2000); C. van Eck, *Purified by Blood: Honour Killings Among Turks in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam, 2003); and B. Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: Origins and the History of the Passions of War* (New York, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Cf., e.g., the papers on Italian and German fascism in S. Behrenbeck and A. Nütznadel (eds), *Inszenierungen des Nationalstaats. Politische Feiern in Italien und Deutschland seit 1860/71* (Köln, 2000).

*The Ritual Tempering of Everyday Risks*

Ritual forms of action that are not oriented towards sanctionable imperatives but that still produce and support cooperative attitudes already exist, according to many sociologists, throughout the societal microspaces of the everyday world. They are not confined to certain opaque, everyday practices of a highly formalized character, but include above all such socially integrative actions as the everyday-ritual forms of greeting that fall under the narrower term of 'symbolically mediated interaction'. From this perspective, social action appears as a rule-bound variant of communicative negotiation that is more or less ritualized according to a given situation, which sets into motion microstructural processes of societal creation of meaning, though without simply repressing the risks involved. In fact, with the help of ritual formality these dangers can be articulated and averted at the same time.<sup>14</sup>

To cite one prominent theory, Erving Goffman contends that the concept of "ritual order" is suitable for designating those symbolic control mechanisms that actors customarily employ in order at least to lessen if not to avoid the risks of loss of face and loss of personality that unavoidably arise in everyday face-to-face situations. The ritual design of such situations, he argues, allows the creation of a balance, an equilibrium between distance (detachment) and proximity (closeness) as it does in the interplay on stage.<sup>15</sup> When Goffman uses the term 'sacred', which he introduced into social practice to indicate the point at which the indefinable or unspeakable risks at work in interpersonal action are intensified and come to a head, he implies that the establishment of a "ritual order" is more than just a simple process of reciprocal control of self and other. On this premise, it could also be understood as that third party (outside of self and other) that arises *between* those resident tendencies to order towards which the action of interacting subjects normally is oriented.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Strauss, *Negotiations* (San Francisco, 1978); on everyday rituals, Soeffner 1992. On the order-producing, institutional function of ritual action, R. Franzpötter, *Organisationskultur. Begriffsverständnis und Analyse aus interpretativ-soziologischer Sicht* (Baden-Baden, 1997), and G. Melville (ed.), *Institutionalität und Symbolisierung. Verstetigungen kultureller Ordnungsmuster in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> The performance of "ritual equilibrium" defuses the conflict latent in every encounter: Goffman 1967, 19–20.

This opens up a space for social cooperation that abounds with ethical issues; Goffman's index of corresponding forms of ritualization at the microlevel of everyday life is practically inexhaustible.<sup>16</sup>

One can summarize Goffman's phenomenology as a depiction of actors who respond to the uncertainties of social interaction with greater or lesser degrees of self-presentation or self-ritualization. In this way, 'meaningful' action (*sinnhaftes Handeln*) is directly linked to the meaning-constituting, symbolic processes of stage and ritual performance.<sup>17</sup> The advantage of this assumption is that symbolic action is not to be understood as an instrument for achieving certain goals but as an act of interpreting the world—in other words, as a means of interpreting the relationships between social actors. The disadvantage lies in the blurring of the boundaries that separate ritual and theater in the sense of genres of symbolic action.

### *The Usefulness of the Stage Model*

It is no accident that Goffman employs the stage model to explain the phenomenological forms of social practice. Concepts such as 'plot', 'play', 'role', 'gesture', 'expression', 'mimesis', 'scene', and 'framing', but also 'ritual' are—at least in the context of the old world theater tradition—constitutive elements of this model. The stage model has long been the meeting point for theories of social and ritual action. The advantages are apparent, since this model provides recourse to an elaborate poetics of action, which in practically systematic fashion takes account of a great number of those factors that—in a complex interplay of institution, space, time, actors, observers, texts, things (props), and symbolic media—produce a delimited practice that can be related to culturally preformed and at the same time institutionally linked genre rules of action: a political or religious assembly, a marriage, a play, a banquet, a liturgy, a court proceeding, and so on. Moreover, it is implicit in this model to inter-

<sup>16</sup> Rituals of courting, behaving, avoidance, submission, courtesy, apology, exchange, and so on. Overview in H. Willems, *Rahmen und Habitus. Zum theoretischen und methodischen Ansatz Erving Goffmans: Vergleiche, Anschlüsse und Anwendungen* (Frankfurt a. M., 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also H.-G. Soeffner, *Auslegung des Alltags – Der Alltag der Auslegung* (Frankfurt a. M., 1989), 150.

pret action that occurs according to both simultaneous (synchronic) and successive (diachronic) forms of motion and sequential orders. For the analysis of synchrony, the observer perspective can orient itself in terms of the spatial metaphors of the 'field' (Bourdieu) and 'frame' (Goffman) of action, whereas diachrony takes as its subject the temporality of the occurrence and directs the investigative glance toward the sequence of action and its phases, pauses, and jumps understood in the sense of a performance. The all-pervasive dimensions of space and time are at the same time renewed indications of the dependency of actions on conditions not fully at the command of the actors themselves; they are part of that 'reality' that resists action, against which action struggles to become what Sartre termed a "creative project".

### *Performance and Performatives*

To gain a more precise understanding of this, I shall take the perspective of performance theory. Once again, we are faced with ambiguity, since within the context implied here performance stands for an apparently wide range of phenomena of social, linguistic, and aesthetic action as well as technical achievements.<sup>18</sup> An older and, in our context, promising definition of those performances that should be considered part of the complex of cultural practice and *poiesis*, and thus encompass the domains of art and religious ritual, is completely oriented towards the stage model. On this view, the individual parameters—the preconditions of the contextual framework and patterns of endogenous action—form a cluster in which the creative interaction among actors and things produces the cultural order: "a beginning and end, an organized program [. . .], a set of performers, an audience and a place and occasion of performance".<sup>19</sup> The terminological association of 'cultural performance' comes into play here as the designation of a change in analytical perspective. From this new vanishing point, the cultural orders are not perceived as

<sup>18</sup> An overview of the multiple uses of this term in the literature is provided by U. Wirth, "Der Performanzbegriff im Spannungsfeld von Illokution, Iteration und Indexikalität", in U. Wirth (ed.) 2002, 9–60.

<sup>19</sup> M. Singer (ed.), *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia, 1959), xiii.

structures or systems, but rather—precisely by applying the stage model—as sequences of action that unfold dynamically and are situationally defined, well-ordered, sensuously fashioned, and produced interactively.

The preference of the stage model in an action analysis and interpretation conducted in terms of performance theory should not be understood, however, as simply a polemical rejection of the supposedly one-sided predominance of the text model in the cultural sciences.<sup>20</sup> Above all else it directs attention to the *meaning-constituting* processes of speech and action within the framework of a symbolic order preformed by culture and society. The reference to something preceding the actual implementation of action that is implicit in the term 'performance' (such as a program or script) should not, however, blind one to the room for maneuvering and the imponderables that arise in principle between a plan and its realization. The following definition of this primary concept, which draws attention to one of its essential underlying distinctions, is for this reason especially instructive: "performance [is] the actual execution as opposed to its potential".<sup>21</sup> In any case, by placing the implementation of an action between its potential and its realization, a hiatus is designated. And this underscores the idea once again (this time from the other side) that concrete action has to be viewed as an *intermediary event* in which something occurs that the actor himself cannot fully control or anticipate, something that—in positive terms—is part of the order-transforming creativity of the process of action.

From a socio-cultural point of view, *acting* according to one's own lights can only mean acting out traditional patterns of action (that is, action patterns acquired through social learning processes) as freely as possible and as adaptively as necessary. It only makes sense, however, to talk of performance if action corresponds to the most important criteria provided by the stage model. These include a clearly perceivable frame of action, an observable division of roles (regardless of how unstable), an audience in whose eyes the scene is reflected but that is perfectly capable of moving back and forth between the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf., e.g., D. Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography. Towards a Critical Cultural Politics", *Communication Monographs* 58:2 (1991), 179–194.

<sup>21</sup> J. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996), 3. Roach paraphrases Baumann's lexicon article "Performance", 1989.

positions of participant and observer, and—last but not least—a coherent formal context that makes the action/plot ‘readable’ for anyone who knows the code.

Aside from performance as art, the concept of ‘performance’ in cultural studies is nothing more than a product of theory that makes it possible to describe, to ‘read’, to interpret social practices in terms of ‘dramaturgical’ or ‘dramatological’ action.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, action is perceived neither as the representation of given structures of meaning nor as the synthesis of semiotically decipherable sign processes. What is instead involved is the effort to conceive of the course of action as a suspense-filled form of movement of expressive, communicative, and agonal manifestations that constitute contexts of meaning such that they can be analyzed both in iconic (form-related) and indexical (context-related) terms.<sup>23</sup>

If every kind of social action is analyzable in terms of performance theory (the question always being whether this analysis is worth undertaking), this holds all the more so for ritual practice and ritualized action. With one caveat: in precisely the latter case, performance can also be understood differently, namely as a construct of communications theory. Thus speech act theory terms certain utterances, specifically *declarative* ones, ‘performatives’. A frequent linguistic quality of declarative sentences is their connection to the adverb ‘hereby’ and not infrequently to the formalistic “I hereby declare . . .”<sup>24</sup> It is not particularly difficult to recognize the ritual quality of such set phrases, for as a rule they signal the beginning or the end of a ritual, or at least a more or less ritualized social action. Some examples

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of several distinctions between the concepts of performance relevant to aesthetics as compared to cultural studies from the standpoint of drama theory, see E. Fischer-Lichte, “Verwandlung als ästhetische Kategorie. Zur Entwicklung einer neuen Ästhetik des Performativen”, in E. Fischer-Lichte, F. Kreuder, and I. Pflug (eds), *Theater seit den 60er Jahren. Grenzgänge der Avantgarde* (Tübingen, Basel, 1998), 21–91. Ethnological remarks are found in Rao and Köpping 2000.

<sup>23</sup> A text that is cited repeatedly here is Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967). An interesting ethnosyntactic distinction between iconic and indexical meaning is found in C. Goddard, “Ethnosyntax, Ethnopragnatics, Sign-Functions, and Culture”, N.J. Enfield (ed.), *Ethnosyntax. Explorations in Grammar and Culture* (Oxford, 2002), 52–73.

<sup>24</sup> J.R. Searle, “How Performatives Work”, *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12 (1989), 535–558, here 547: “Performatives are declarations because they satisfy the definition of a declaration. The definition is that an utterance is a declaration if the successful performance of the speech act is sufficient to bring about the fit between words and world, to make the propositional content true.”

are: the opening and closing of an assembly or event; acts of naming, appointment, investiture, endowment, and establishment; testamentary dispositions, acts of enfeoffment, bestowal, and consecration; revocations of such acts; the taking of an oath or making of a vow; and the situations in which contracts are agreed upon ('closed') or terminated. The term 'performance' in this context stands for the congruence of verbal and nonverbal actions. The spoken declaration functions in such cases in the same way as an act of settlement, of establishing something, since it defines a frame of action and in this sense distinguishes between two structures of order. Nonetheless, this intermediary action, articulated via speech act, does not, as is sometimes claimed, constitute "new realities".<sup>25</sup>

Admittedly, every declarative act can, due to its obligational character, function as a cause that has concrete consequences in case of a violation of the obligation entered into (for instance, breach of contract or perjury). But frequently it only confirms authority structures and the boundaries that exist between distinct realms of action, realms that are as a rule established institutionally. An uninvolved third party may thus recognize in these practices the following characteristics of classic ritual processes (which, incidentally, encompass far more than just purely linguistic events and thus can be described in terms of the stage model): delegation of the speech act on the basis of collectively recognized authority, the formality of verbal and nonverbal acts of initiation and closing, atmospheric shaping of the scene of action (often only intimated symbolically), gestures of approval by participants, and so on. Declarations are threshold phenomena, that is, they mark the thresholds between different realms of action and are thus very well suited for attributing (as well as denying) persons and things the meaning that is sedimented in the classification processes of the social world and that forms the reciprocal perceptions of actors.

*For a Poetics of the Ritual (das Rituelle)*

To get a better grasp of the significant differences between the general theoretical concept of social action and the more specific forms

<sup>25</sup> A claim made by U. Bohle and E. König, "Zum Begriff des Performativen in der Sprachwissenschaft", *Paragrana* 10:1 (2001), 13-34, here 22.

of ritual practice (in spite of all the features they share), I propose the development of a poetics of the ritual (*das Rituelle*) that can give adequate articulation to the multifactorial scope of the action type it addresses. Potential content here is not limited to the rules of design and creation of verbal and nonverbal action but also includes the action *situations* typical for ritual and their *institutional* preconditions. Every social action without exception can be ritualized. If this occurs, it brings the organization of everyday life, regardless how loosely it may be structured, into contact with those intermediary worlds of the imaginary and the symbolic that either give legitimacy to well-established social meaning or subvert its very foundation. Discussion in this context, however, should take up particularly those rigorously composed ritual practices (of the life cycle, the religious calendar, or political commemoration, for instance) that are institutionally anchored and can be accepted as fairly clearly established genres of symbolic action.

Whereas the primary focus of this paper has been on the general forms of social action, the remainder of the discussion will focus on some of the approaches that make reference to the specific formal criteria of ritual events. The well-known semantic affinity between the ritual (*das Rituelle*), on the one hand, and the practices of religious cults and the inviolability of the sacred, on the other, has motivated researchers again and again to suspect that a power to provide foundations for such organizational creations is inherent in the ritual (*das Rituelle*), which, in the sense of a cosmological totality, blends the particular with the universal.<sup>26</sup> If from this standpoint the ritual (*das Rituelle*) is built up into a moment in the genesis of certain types of worldviews, a different direction in research focuses on the clear surface features of ritual formality in order to equip the processes of design with an especially effective power of interpretation. The basic thesis of this line of research can be summarized as follows: In the performance of forms of ritual action, the actors demonstrate that they seek to harmonize with that symbolic world whose spelled-out images are anchored in the institutionally crystallized foundations—in the conventions, statutes, and “holy” texts—of the ritual culture under investigation. On this assumption, rule compliance

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<sup>26</sup> R.A. Rappaport goes the furthest here, advocating a ritual-theoretical universalism in his book *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Rappaport 1999).

appears as an approval index, and the physical enactment of the formative acts appears as the heightened pictorial realization (in the sense of iconicity) of that potential for organization and effect, the updating of which, realized not by discourse but by ritual performance, reinterprets the respective social world. In other words, on this view ritual action is not a representation of the rules of the normative order of social existence (although it can give expression to the normative order), but is instead the rule-governed 'intermediary event' of their deployment, their institutionalization and symbolic legitimation.<sup>27</sup> Pierre Bourdieu speaks here in a generalizing manner of "*rites d'institution*", and the universalist Roy A. Rappaport speaks, with reference to the performance of ritual, of the "tacit social contract" as "*the basic social act*".<sup>28</sup> Especially the emphasis made in the last quote I consider to be exaggerated: we should remind ourselves that under the conditions of modernity ritual has lost some of its foundational powers in society, which may have been inherent in it under different, premodern conditions of life.

Worth noting in this context is the emphasis on form with regard not only to verbally based action but also to bodily based action in the sense of nonverbal 'language'. Catherine Bell introduced—as a correlate to 'social body'—the term 'ritual body' into the debate. This term ascribes to the physical body a sense of ritual acquired in learning processes, with the help of which subjects are supposedly in a position to give shape to scenes of social action that transcend everyday life.<sup>29</sup> It is a moot point whether this shift to the physical is helpful. Form is both: *morphé* and *eidós*, sensuously perceivable form and a concept-model of well-shaped order. The two combine and meet in form-giving creation, and what the analysis should focus upon is a question of viewpoint. Nor is it the case that content retreats behind optical presence; instead, the form's surface should be conceived as the physiognomically 'readable' exterior of an inner

<sup>27</sup> I take the concept of 'intermediary event' (*Zwischenergebnis*) from B. Waldenfels, *Ordnung im Zwielicht* (Frankfurt a. M., 1987), 47: "As an *intermediary event*, I consider something that, in taking place, links itself to something else, and does so in such a way as to be a response to its stimulus and demands. Insofar as this holds for every utterance and every action, each would be an interlocutory or interactive event."

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bourdieu 1982, and Rappaport 1999, 135–138, respectively.

<sup>29</sup> Bell 1992, 98–117.

form. Indeed, it appears that the physiognomic aspect deserves particular attention as a special feature of ritual practice. For in the formality of ritual action an interpretive reference to material and content *shows itself* (in the Wittgensteinian sense).<sup>30</sup> If, for instance, the physical body becomes the medium of the performance, it may be interpretable as a 'ritual body'. In my view it is decisive here to understand the ritual action acted out with the body as an act of interpretation, which cannot be performed discursively but only through the distinct form of action itself.<sup>31</sup> The readability of this act may interest the outside interpreter of the event; the person caught up in the action, however, is only moved by its conformity with the immediate context (with the authority conducting the ritual and with the group acting along with him or her). It is fair to speak of an 'empty ritual' if the form of action, in conjunction with the contextual point of reference, has lost its functions of interpretive embodiment, a loss that includes the special 'formulaic' truth claim, which finds expression in the rhythmic repetition of specific patterns of action.<sup>32</sup> There is nothing particularly surprising in the fact that ritual form can be separated from ritual content. This phenomenon can be observed today wherever ritual comes back with a vengeance as a lifestyle accessory.

The ritual nexus between the form in which the action is carried out and the interpretation embodied in this performance refers to both the spoken word and nonverbal 'language'. It thus encompasses both practice and *poiesis*: *poiesis* in the meaning of the symbolically effective design and creation, *practice* in the meaning of the successful or unsuccessful action. In ritual both act together in a practically inseparable way: the constructs of *poiesis*—for instance, the atmospheric and architectonic fashioning of the scene and the incorporation of highly symbolic paraphernalia (such as costumes, relics, icons, [sacrificial] offerings)—lead the actors to situate themselves in relation

<sup>30</sup> What holds for the form of the proposition should also hold for the form of symbolic action; cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 4.022.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. also C.L. Briggs, *Competence in Performance. The Creativity of Tradition in Mexican Verbal Art* (Philadelphia, 1988), and the observations made in reference to Nepalese ritual practices by M. Gaenszle (2000).

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Giddens referred to it as "formulaic truth" in his "Living in a Post-Traditional Society", U. Beck, A. Giddens, and S. Lash (eds), *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Oxford, 1994), 56–109, here 63 and *passim*.

to the 'other' space, the 'other' time, and to respond in speech and gesture to the materially embodied claims of the ritual topic in question. This response may amount to the imitation and repetition of the patterned actions presented or may deteriorate into a collective performance rhythm in the course of which participating actively is turned into being carried along passively. This is a process that itself can include further transformations in the framework of which the spoken word becomes a thing and the thing becomes the author of someone's else's (sacred) speech.<sup>33</sup> This can go so far that words and sentences distorted to the point of incomprehensibility through rhythmic recitation are ascribed a greater level of truth than grammatically correct speech.<sup>34</sup> An analogous paradox holds for ritualized patterns of action whose customary semantics can be overturned in the performance of rhythmic repetitions such that taxonomy 'runs wild', so to speak, granting actors access to the outer limits of experience. If the performance of customary action is already capable of conveying the experience of passage to the actor, then, according to classical theories, it holds for ritual action that it is this and especially this experience that is supposed to be consciously produced by means of 'ritualization'. How this experience is to be interpreted, however, ultimately depends on the actors. Scholarly interpreters, specialists in generalization, like to make recourse to those models of passage that have arisen in the Van Gennep and Turner line of argumentation. This involves a prescientific decision, however, that harbors sympathy for the belief in magical powers. For no rite of passage *makes* a boy into a man or a sick man healthy. Instead, what it does do for a short period—as Maurice Bloch accurately describes—is to decouple one sphere of reality (that of culture, for instance) from another sphere of reality (for instance, that of the social).<sup>35</sup>

Maurice Bloch compared the criteria of formalized speech acts as they occur in ritual practice to the speech acts of everyday life and

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<sup>33</sup> I use the concept of transformation here solely in reference to the changes in state within ritual practice. To attribute societally transformative powers to rituals appears to me as a rather insignificant form of begging the question (*petitio principii*) of ritual research since every kind of social action has more or less transformative effects.

<sup>34</sup> P. Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A Cognitive Description of Traditional Discourse* (Cambridge, 1990), 81.

<sup>35</sup> Bloch 1989, 43. For this reason Bourdieu does not speak of 'passage' in "Les rites comme actes d'institution" (1982) but of 'instituting' and 'boundary-setting'.

posited for the former an obligatory rule-bound character that culminates in a demand for thoroughgoing stylization.<sup>36</sup> Once again, the emphasis is accordingly on design and the production that builds upon it. That which is ephemeral, the spoken word, receives—by way of special, formative artifices (or strategems), which are not infrequently akin to those of poetic speech—a peculiar materiality, and these artifices shift perception away from the meaning of what is said to the speech event itself. These artifices include repetition, anaphora, transmutation, duplication, inversion, and parallelism; all artifices that shift meaning from the level of criticizable, propositional content to the level of noncriticizable, magical operations, at the center of which the recursive articulation of formulaic gestures and utterances is found. Contrary to a widely held prejudice, repetitions and set phrases in the ritual context cannot simply be deemed part of an ossified formalism. On the one hand, ritual practice does not limit itself in its use of repetition to language and its set phrases, but also makes use, in its reiteration, of the fashioning of the scene of action, the choice of paraphernalia, and the bodily conveyed expressive functions (gestures) of the participants.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, ritual repetition is one of the mnemonic devices that does not *stop* time but rather *emphasizes* it in order to establish that continuity of order called 'tradition' and that is meant to form a bulwark against the disintegration of community.<sup>38</sup>

On these premises ritual (not *ritualized*) speech cannot be conceived either as a customary speech act or as discourse in the sense of sentences and texts interlinked in an *argument*. A good example is provided by the declarative utterances referred to above, which customarily set up a framework within which other declarations in turn find a place. Let us assume that rituals create community and thus display an integrative effect that is ephemeral and accordingly in need of constant renewal through repetition. If this is so, it transpires not on the basis of statements or conveyed information but by means of the formative texture of the community's bodily conveyed collective action. Such action includes not only a harmonization and rhythmic

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<sup>36</sup> Bloch 1989, 19–45.

<sup>37</sup> The cognitive interrelations are discussed by P. Boyer in *Tradition as Truth and Communication*, 13–23 and 91–93.

<sup>38</sup> On the function of ritual practice as a constitutive medium of tradition, see Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society", 62–74.

coordination of gesture, but also the prosodic figures of speech recitation and—let us not forget—certain situational, frequently theatrical framing conditions. In other words, a ritual community arises in a space that is artificially created by means of the remodeling and, not infrequently, distortion of natural speech and gesture. In this space, stylization and production of form go beyond the constative, communicative, and strategic functions of customary speaking in the direction of the metaphorical, in order to create a level of interpretation upon which—as in an intermediary world—the modes of social category formation can be revitalized and reoriented. If they intend to achieve the desire for normative consensus characteristic of the ritual attitude, they are dependent upon a performative disconnection from the occurrences of everyday life.<sup>39</sup> This is a thesis that I would like to limit in its application only to those actions that, as compositionally thoroughly formed rituals, satisfy the demands made of a genre of symbolic action that is structurally comparable to the genre of onstage dramatic production.<sup>40</sup>

*Schismogenesis, or Ritual Becomes Reflexive in Modernity*

What holds for any process of stylization or formalization also holds for any given organizational form of ritual action: it can be located on a graded spectrum that ranges from strong to weak in ritual character. Highly ritualized action coincides with 'ritual practice'. This category encompasses all events that manifest themselves as well-composed productions and that as a whole make up an independent genre of symbolic action; the genre designation 'ritual' marks the relative autonomy of this form of action vis-à-vis other possible forms of action. At the opposite end of the spectrum, all the social actions would be listed that possess ritual qualities without associating this with the claim to membership in the genre of symbolic action; I term these 'ritualized actions'. By offering a graduated

<sup>39</sup> Bloch 1989, 43, speaks in a similar context of the "disconnection which is produced by the mode of communication of ritual".

<sup>40</sup> The comparison refers in particular to the contemporary forms of *improvisational theater*, whose dramatic narratives arise out of the interaction with the audience and that, precisely because of this freedom, has to rely on a relatively strictly formalized art of performance.

model, my primary intent is not to make a diplomatic maneuver in research pragmatics. What is important here is to point out in a heuristic fashion that it pays to make the distinction between *modalities* and *species* of action. Put more simply, there is a big difference between ritualizing an everyday action (in other words, giving it a ritual form) and celebrating a ritual that allows the participants, right from the threshold of the performance onwards, to escape the constraints of the everyday world and enter a sphere of festivity and ceremony.

When the conceptualization of action is at stake, it is of little value to try to establish a rigid terminological framework. Admittedly, types of action can be distinguished according to form and function,<sup>41</sup> but from the perspective of performance theory the transitions, processes, and dynamic movements are the genuine objects of an analytic view. At this point I would like explicitly to draw attention to the term 'dynamics', but in a twofold sense: first, as a term of motion that refers to the processes *within* the ritual occurrence and, second, as a synonym for the cultural and social changes that ritual practices and ritualized action is subject to in the course of history.

We are indebted to Gregory Bateson for the neologism 'schismogenesis', with which he sought to conceptualize the paradox of *unity in diversity* taken up again and again in numerous anthropological studies of ritual.<sup>42</sup> In this view the ritual organization of turning points in time in the life-cycle, calendar, or social sense responds to the inexorably changing character of life. It does so by setting limits in a formal process of ritual collective action and, at the same time, lessening the concomitant risk of change to the established order with an appeal to a unity-granting primeval scene (such as a foundational or creational myth). To paraphrase briefly, in this context schismogenesis designates a breach in the social order (which is impending or has already occurred) that is balanced out by the performance of ritual that employs a time-transcending interpretive structure and thus can suddenly change, without harm, into the genesis of a transformed configuration of order.

<sup>41</sup> See the construction of formally and pragmatically relevant types in J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns 1: Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung* (Frankfurt a. M., 1981), 440–460.

<sup>42</sup> G. Bateson, *Naven* (Palo Alto, 2d ed., 1958), 175.

It makes no sense, however, to restrict this effect to ritual action alone. I would argue that schismogenesis, in the sense alluded to above, is a phenomenon that accompanies social action per se. For in every act of *interaction*, which is to say, social action, there exists the latent potential for disruption and breakdown. The contradiction can be given an even more radical formulation, once the *longue-durée* processes of sociocultural evolution become the focus of attention. The interplay between differentiation and integration referred to by our 'magic word' is—that is, in this perspective—a sign particularly of the waves of socialization that mark modern life. Since the early period of European modernity, the sociocultural dialectic of differentiation and integration represents one of the key topics in historical thought. It is thus a component of that preparatory phase of modernity in which the gradual transition to the post-traditional form of society took place. "People can only be united through separation! Only through continuous separation can they be kept unified!"—This is how a classic text of Enlightenment philosophy rendered this dialectic.<sup>43</sup>

There is yet another argument that makes it possible to apply the magic word of schismogenesis to the macrocosm of sociohistorical change, including ritual traditions. For from the Archimedean point of post-traditional societies, the anthropological studies that pursue the trail of ritual in premodern or nonmodern life-forms have a museum-like character to them. What we associate today with the term 'ritual' in an emphatic and nostalgic sense are often phenomena that have been freed from or (with ethnographic care) cut out of contexts of the creation and maintenance of tradition: remnants of past life-forms whose precariously reconstructed meaning can no longer provide the present (with its pursuit of the open-ended) with any orientation but can be used for political purposes—as second-order rituals. And it is this that gives modern societies all the more reason to delegate critical reflection on the "schisms" opening up between old and new to those cultural studies experts whom they maintain in highly subsidized institutions created for precisely that purpose.

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<sup>43</sup> Lessing in the second dialogue from *Ernst und Falk* (1778/1780). On this and its context, cf. D. Harth, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, oder Die Paradoxien der Selbsterkenntnis* (München, 1993), 226–231.

Today the powers that form society are dependent neither on tradition nor its ritual transmission. They are instead 'embodied' in institutions, each of which invents its own particular tradition and, if it seems advisable for reasons of organization or power politics, takes the opportunity to give these traditions a ritual cast. Like the traditions they constitute and interpret, the media themselves have also long become reflexive. Ritual citations and inventions have infiltrated practically all of the modern art genres in terms of materials and technique: sculpture and painting use them as remedies in their struggles against conventions and academic art; in music they are present, as transmitted by jazz, as an idiom of creolization; in architecture, as ornament and quotation; in theater and opera, as a desire to win back cultic effects. What is more, ritual design has long been a commercial service with socio-therapeutic and hygienic claims and a specialty of the fashion industry. And there is a feedback loop from ethnographic studies to the consciousness of their previous objects of research, which contributes to theatrical revivals and syncretist mask games. The Australian aborigines whom Émile Durkheim cited as representatives of a prereflexive ritualism in their efforts to promote their land rights make reference to the studies of the same ethnologists with whom their ancestors had to do. It would be self-deceptive and in bad faith if one were to attempt to interpret the search for lost religious or esoteric rituals as a genuine revival of meaningfully oriented traditions. The schism between lived traditions and their excavation for the purpose of a forced revitalization cannot even be bridged ritually.

Anthony Giddens has taken up Paul Boyer's theory of tradition in order to bring that mechanism of reflexivity into play that, as a moment of globalization, has now pervaded, without exception, each and every culture. In post-traditional societies, the 'expert' has now assumed the place of the 'specialist' in the premodern society, who as the 'guardian of tradition' was ascribed the title of 'wise man' and possessed direct access to that formulaic truth that coincided with socially binding, ritually acted-out causal powers.<sup>44</sup> The modern expert does not listen to the voices of the ancestors or to those

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<sup>44</sup> "Those who hold authority [in traditional cultures]—or effectively 'are' authority—in this way do or are so by virtue of their special access to the causal powers of formulaic truth." Giddens, "Living in a Post-Traditional Society", 83.

of nature; he does not have wisdom at his disposal, but has acquired key competencies and is thus a specialist on the basis of theoretically grounded and experimentally tested knowledge that is subject to permanent revision.

It is not difficult to discover behind this sketch the image of the scientifically trained expert who reflects, with the detachment of an analyst, on ritual in early high cultures, in contemporary but alien lifeworlds, and even in his or her own everyday world. What this produces corresponds to the tendencies of post-traditional societies to collect, sort, and compare the most varied cultural patterns and frequently to fit them together into new applicable patterns. This results in a proliferating duplication of concepts and things, which demands ever new classifications, a dynamism, one could say, that has also brought into association that which we designate as 'the ritual' (*das Rituelle*) with fairly free conceptions of cultural improvisation. Victor Turner's project of using the ethnographic bookkeeping of traditional ritual practices of alien cultures as a score in order to track down their performance on the stage of the post-traditional age is a suitable answer to the ubiquity of cultural and scientific reflexivity in our 'second modernity'.<sup>45</sup>

Translated by Neil Solomon

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<sup>45</sup> Turner 1982a, 89–101.