

Liminality, Structures, and ‘The Problem of the Lie’

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This article is companion piece to a lengthy essay published in Liminalities 16.4 (2020). In that essay, I argued there are shortcomings to the general theorizing of liminality. In this essay, I bring these shortcomings to bear around the theme of ritual’s relationship to matters of lying and trust, as developed by Roy Rappaport, and reflect on the ‘new normal’ of transgressing norms. The claim is that ‘liturgical ritual’ is a means to counteract the pervasive problem of the lie.

Introduction

During the first impeachment trial of President Trump, I wrote a long essay on what I perceived as the ‘limits of liminality’ and the ‘problem of the lie.’ The editors of *Liminalities* asked it to be published in two parts, and the first part appeared in the December (2020) issue.¹ Oddly, I made the revisions to this second part as the second impeachment trial of President Trump was taking place. The problem of the lie has reared its ugly head, and I fear it may be with us for some time to come.

In that earlier essay, I argued that the theorizing of liminality is facing some key challenges. These challenges become especially pressing, given global culture as whole seems to be marked by the liminal—or at least, as Victor Turner suggested, by the liminoid. If liminal periods are points of crisis in the life of an individual or group, the multiple interlocking crises facing the world today (climate change, weakening democracy, rampant economic inequality, racism, virulent

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¹ Barry Stephenson, “The Limits of Liminality: A Critique of Transformationism,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 16.4 (2020).

forms of extremism) mark ours as a collective liminal moment. Because these various elements of crisis are interconnected, we need to find anchoring points at which they meet and interlock. One such anchor is the current breakdown of institutional trustworthiness, in turn anchored in the pervasiveness of what I will call, following the thought of, among others, Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, Chris Hedges, and Roy Rappaport, 'the problem of the lie.'

At the onset of 2020, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists advanced its 'doomsday clock' to 100 seconds before 'midnight,' the organization's most dire assessment to date of the danger posed by the simultaneous existential threats of atomic war and climate change. Significantly, the Bulletin also emphasizes the compounding of threats by "cyber-enabled information warfare" and the degradation of our "international political infrastructure," phenomena that "undercuts society's ability to respond." "Distrust," the Bulletin warns, marks the "continued corruption of the information ecosphere on which democracy and public decision making depend and has heightened the nuclear and climate threats."² In the absence of a bedrock of truth telling and trust in public institutions, the ability to respond to threats and fashion a world where people live not simply in safety and security but with some measure of dignity, hope, and pleasure is fettered. In an era of widespread political instability (incarnated and symbolized most tellingly by the Trump Presidency), institutions have faced severe stress tests; given the outcome of the second impeachment trial, perhaps we may conclude some of them have broken.

The Problem of the Lie

It is broadly agreed that the distinguishing feature separating homo sapiens from other primates is linguistic capacity. Developments in the power of language and symbolization no doubt conferred tremendous advantages in proto-human communities and would have been highly selected for. But for all the advantages of language, there are vices which distill into what anthropologist Roy Rappaport calls the "problem of the lie." Intentional lying expands more basic powers of deceit found in other species, introducing a threat that is at best potentially harmful and at worst a generator of social chaos and the basis of totalitarian rule.

In Dante's rungs or levels of hell, the centermost is not filled with those who have committed acts of physical violence but with the treacherous. Just above treachery is fraud. Treachery is a betrayal of trust, a violation of allegiance, falsity, an act of deception. Fraud is an act of deception for unfair or unlawful gain. Each is an abuse of a relationship. Dante's imagination is fueled by a long-recognized

² Gayle Spinazze, "It is Now 100 Seconds to Midnight," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Jan. 23, 2020. <https://thebulletin.org/2020/01/press-release-it-is-now-100-seconds-to-midnight/>.

understanding that trustworthiness and truthfulness form the bedrock of personal relationships and social life generally. Erik Erickson identified the experience of “basic trust” as the well-spring of early childhood development.³ So too in macro social life. All cultures recognize acts of violating norms and precepts; put differently, all cultures recognize the need for trustworthiness and the dire problems associated with deceit and lying. Martin Buber named “the lie as the specific evil which man has introduced into nature.” The problem of lying in ancient Israel, Buber argued in his commentary on Psalm 12, is not merely suffering individual liars but living in the midst of “a generation of the lie . . . the lie in this generation [of the Psalmist] has reached the highest level of perfection as an ingeniously controlled means of supremacy . . . [removing] completely . . . the basis of men's common life.” Social life, if it is to promote well-being and development of individual potentials, rests on basic principles or structures of trust—“in God we trust”—, which in turn cannot be formed, cannot be engendered or enculturated, should reliability, credibility, and trustworthiness characterize our communications. When lying is endemic, when access to facts and truth blocked, we put ourselves, as Buber writes, in the hands of at “an ingeniously controlled means of supremacy.”⁴

There is a reckoning with our ‘post-fact’ culture playing itself out, a form of life in which of Hannah Arendt locates the origins of totalitarianism.

Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it.... The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.⁵

We are back to living in proto-fascist Europe, in the Psalmist’s generation of the lie. Just short decades after the fall of fascist and communist regimes, we are witnessing the rebirth of totalitarian tendencies, propelled by the most insidious propaganda and lie delivery machine ever invented, social media and the internet. At the risk of being overly reductive, if we can’t solve the problem of lying, of the erasure of all distinction between true and false, none of the other substantial

³ Erik Erikson *The Lifecycle Completed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

⁴ Martin Buber, *Good and Evil: Two Interpretations* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 7-8.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1973), 350; 474.

crises bearing down us can ever hope to be addressed.⁶ We are back to wrestling with the most basic of problems that our species faced during its evolutionary and cultural histories: lying.

The Liminal and the Structural

Liminal acts can surely expose, ridicule, and subvert many things, including lying; but they are relatively inept at construction, at instantiating and embodying a life-world, at establishing and stabilizing truth. Consider an excellent paper by Mie Scott Georgsen and Bjørn Thomassen, a study of liminality in the Kiev uprisings that took place in Independence Square, from November 21, 2013 to the spring of 2014.⁷ The authors theorize the uprisings through Victor Turner's model of social drama and connect the liminality of the scene in the square to the production of affectivity and inter-subjectivity among the participants. During the action, Independence Square in Kiev was barricaded, becoming a liminal zone for the expression of dissent and the embodiment of a community projecting a vision of the desire to be, simply, a "proper society."

We argue that the uprisings—some call it a revolution—involve the essential features of liminality: suspension of ordinary rules; a fundamental questioning of power structures and political legitimacy; an order turned upside-down; a situation marked by volatility, ambivalence, and potentiality; and the embryonic formation of a *communitas* as protesters met and mobilized in Independence Square in ritualized action, unified by confronting the same essential dangers.

One area on the square, for example, was named 'Open Mic Camp,' where individuals could variously speak, scream, sing, or cry—the embodiment of not so much free speech, as right speech: speech that self-consciously aims to expose and correct the deceptions and corruption of language within the political class and mediatized worlds.

This example of the use of Turnerian theory to understand ritualized protest and dissent is common and is often extended to situations and scenarios less openly militant, dangerously violent, and revolutionary, but nevertheless informed by parody and satire, inversion and transgression, as the means to the

⁶ As Chris Hedges notes, "the iron refusal by those who engage in the permanent lie to acknowledge reality, no matter how transparent reality becomes, creates a collective psychosis" (*America, The Farewell Tour* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 24. See Chris Hedges, "The Permanent Lie, Our Deadliest Threat," *TruthDig*, Dec. 17, 2017.

⁷ M. Scott Georgsen & Bjørn Thomassen, "Affectivity and liminality in ritualized protest: Politics of transformation in the Kiev uprising," *Theory & Psychology*, 27, no.2 (2017): 198–214.

reflective analysis and contemplation of social structures by virtue of their being temporarily suspended. But consider just how bizarre this scenario is: Freely telling the truth, speaking openly and honestly from the heart at Open Mic Camp, is understood as a suspension of the normal, status quo, mundane run of things, namely, a public language mired in deceit, lies, feints, and corruptions, the traditional domain of the devil. Here precisely is the nub of the matter: What are the roles of ritual, performance, creativity, in producing a society that, for example, does not found itself on our potential to disseminate and lie, a society without fake news, denial of science, false advertising and, at best, half-truths?

Today, truth telling is the extraordinary suspension of the mundane rule of the lie. The negative freedom from the repression of speech ushered in by Enlightenment traditions is infected today with a positive freedom to lie. Put in the terms of semiology, once signs are cut free from that which they signify, and anything can stand for anything else, our communications, which are inherently symbolic, are open not merely to readjustments and reanimations but to deceptions and lies. How is the freedom that marks modernity, the freedom to do as one wishes, in this case, to lie and deceive, how is this freedom prevented from running wild? By good will and heartfelt sincerity? But where do these come from? Clearly, it seems to me, truth telling ought not to be the purview of liminal acts, but a shared structural norm. Structuralist theories of ritual and performance, such as those proposed by Roy Rappaport and Adam Seligman argue for the role of formal, declarative, indicative ritual (what Rappaport terms 'liturgy') in creating the basic values and axioms comprising a worldview.

For Rappaport, liturgical ritual—words, actions, gestures not entirely encoded by the performers but rather given to a group, from outside as it were (from tradition, ancestors, the gods), to regularly enact—is the essential means by which humanity counters its potential to lie. Rappaport argues that in the course of our evolutionary history the rise of ritual (and, more broadly, religion) was an adaptation 'designed' to deal with the potentially socially destructive features of language. The same powers of language to deploy symbols and conceive alternatives also generates the ability to lie and lying can become a threat to the viability of not only personal relations but group dynamics and entire social systems. Rappaport spends some 500 pages arguing his central thesis, that the work of ritual is to stabilize or delimit the danger of the lie. Rappaport makes the case that ritual (via its formal, fixed sequences set off from everyday behavior) generates a standard of behavior beyond the will of any individual actor. Ritual is "not simply a symbolic representation of social contract but tacit social contract itself. As such, ritual, which also establishes, guards, and bridges boundaries between public systems and private processes, is *the* basic social act."⁸ Again, Rappaport's argument is

⁸ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 138.

extensive, and I am not doing it justice. A simple example, however, may lead in the direction of Rappaport's thought.

I point to the overtly ceremonial beginnings of the impeachment trials of President Trump, which included at the outset a public swearing of an oath and the physical signing of one's name in a register. Rappaport's point is that such ritualized acts "entails formal acceptance of the order encoded in that ritual," establishing "an obligation to comply with that order." One may be insincere (though the ritual forms does mitigate insincerity), and obligations may be violated. Nevertheless, when one performs the formal liturgy, one becomes obligated to speak the truth. An impeachment trial can be understood in both liminal and liturgical terms. Many media commentators, observing the ceremony, uttered some version of 'this has just gotten real.' Through the oath ceremony, something not present was made present: The words of members and witness were suddenly wrapped in seriousness, enfolded in an aura or frame of sacrality. It is for this reason that individuals willing to lie in public suddenly become truth tellers once inside a ritual frame or refuse to step inside that frame by virtue of it obligating them to speak truthfully. "Ritual acceptance ... establishes conventional rules and understandings in a way that insulates them from the vagaries of ordinary usage and that then permits them to be used as standards against which proper morality and daily behavior can be judged."⁹ Without obligation, there can be no violation of a precept, a value, a belief. Such violation, depending on the culture in question, is variously backed up with the force of law, with ostracization, with shaming, with punishment, and other means.

But an impeachment trial, for all its high seriousness and formality, is as much a liminal phenomenon in Turner's sense as, say, carnivalesque festivity. If modern society is largely filled with liminoid (quasi-liminal) phenomena, a rite such as a trial reveal the occasional presence of a deeper, 'structural' liminality. One of the central differences between the two (the liminoid and the liminal) is, as Turner notes, the measure of obligation. In separating out play and leisure from work, suggests Turner, modern society becomes more overtly experimental compared with social systems that "are relatively stable, cyclical, and repetitive." Even though liminal phenomena may be saturated with *communitas*, there is, states Turner, nevertheless something formally obligatory about them: "Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread."¹⁰ Here are dimensions of Turner's theorizing of liminality that are often overlooked; tending to them tempers the critique of Turner offered in my earlier essay.

Turner often emphasizes that liminal ritual opens up a space for "a period of reflection" where "neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about

⁹ Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 201.

¹⁰ Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 43.

their society, their cosmos and the powers that generate and sustain them.” The liminal period of a liminal rite thus “enfranchises speculation” — Is he guilty? Is she innocent? What is the significance of their actions? — and creates the “freedom to juggle with the factors of existence,” — How to weigh this or that piece of evidence? What are the implications of this or that decision? What are the consequences of not checking these actions? But Turner fully recognizes that such liminal frames are bounded by structural forms of relative stability:

[T]his [liminal] liberty has fairly narrow limits ... there are usually held to be certain axiomatic principles of construction, and certain basic building blocks that make up the cosmos and into whose nature no neophyte may inquire.

In entering the liminal space of a trial, you are necessarily obligated to tell the truth, a deep structural social principle.¹¹

One of Rappaport’s historical arguments is that in small scale “simple societies” ethics are grounded in mostly face-to-face relationships and interactions. In larger, more complex ones, these interactions are replaced to a large degree by more abstract concepts, such as “charity, the golden rule, the virtuousness of loving neighbors and even enemies, the blessedness of giving.” The decline of shared, embodied ritual and the parallel advent of more ethereal principles whose presence depends largely on acts of will, suggests Rappaport, places society in a precarious situation:

[I]f, in the absence of behavior consistently and reliably conforming to them, the ethical conceptions established in the rituals of complex societies are to be more than honored in their breach, but are, rather, to be effective in shaping actual behavior, they may have to be reiterated with sabbatarian or even daily frequency.¹²

What is revealed in the Trump era is the fragility of norms in the absence of their regularized bodily reiteration and entrainment.

Conclusion

Árpád Szakolczai, pointing to the modern and postmodern retreat from norms and stable structures to a state of “permanent liminality,” recognizes the need to respond to the resulting “anguishing conditions of uncertainty.” Permanent liminality

¹¹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 105-106.

¹² Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, 205.

brings disaster to all parties involved; it consumes their forces, persisting until their resources are exhausted, leaving nothing but devastation through escalating mimetic crisis.... Most participants of the situation have long forgotten even the idea of how it was when things were 'stable' and 'normal.'¹³

Szakolczai's proposed solution, offered with the requisite rhetorical eloquence, is a cultural and personal turn to, following Pascal, 'the reasons of the heart.' The escape route from the confusion and hopelessness of modernity's embrace of permanent liminality turns out to be the heartfelt meditation on the "human condition," on those "most basic values and truths of human and social life."

I do not wish to disparage the humanism of Szakolczai's plea for cultivating habits of the heart and an affective sense for the limits of rationality. I largely agree with his claim that to embrace "more change, more innovation, more excitement"¹⁴ is precisely to dance with the devil that has engendered the very conditions we wish to counteract. (Szakolczai uses the metaphors of re-infecting a sick body and pouring fuel on the fire.) No doubt the value of rhetoric to social life has been both debased and ignored, and I welcome Szakolczai's efforts to renew it. Still, Szakolczai perhaps underestimates the need for, as Rappaport emphasizes, regular bodily entrainment and iteration beyond the occasional, extraordinary situations of pilgrimage and passage rites.

Adam Seligman and his colleagues, in an effort to retrieve ritual, develop a typology opposing ritual with sincerity, preferring the social power of ritual over our current preferred reliance on matters of will, sincerity and the heart, which they trace to the influence of Protestant culture.¹⁵ We need well-honed distinctions; but we also need to avoid binary oppositions of this type. Their key insight, derived from Rappaport, is that ritual does not merely reflect beliefs and values, but is generative of them. In any case, action and thinking (feeling, willing) are deeply interconnected.

I have reservations about a one-sided emphasis on either ritual or the powers of the will and heart that avoids ritualization in an indicative, normative mode. Szakolczai's discussion is, as always, nuanced, and he does speak to matters of embodiment in a brief discussion of the entailments of pilgrimage practices. I've no wish to set-up a ritual-rhetoric divide; the two can certainly co-exist and each has their own contributions to righting the ship. I would suggest that many of the normative rites and performances Richard Schechner seems to demean by locating them in the "centers of social life" are as much a step out of mundane, ordinary

¹³ Szakolczai, "Permanent (Trickster) Liminality," 234.

¹⁴ Szakolczai, "Permanent (Trickster) Liminality," 244.

¹⁵ Adam Seligman et.al, *Ritual and Its Consequences An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

time as ‘extraordinary’ moments of passage.¹⁶ Liturgical rites often also entail a reordering of relationships and statuses among participants, different from those that reign during ordinary time, overriding the logics and statutes that operate as matter of course in the mundane world, while also carrying-over to their reincorporation in that ordinary world, apropos J.Z. Smith, where ritual is “a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.”¹⁷

If, as was suggested in the earlier essay, modernity has eroded liturgical ritual forms in favor of the liminoid and the carnivalesque; if, as Rappaport has argued, liturgical rites have been at the foundation of dealing with the problem of the lie; and if, as appears to be the case, lying (and with it, mistrust) pervades the public sphere and social institutions—then we should be working hard to recover or fashion anew ritual forms that serve as an aid to rebuild truth-telling and faith in public institutions. In such a scenario, the near single-minded attention to liminoid ritual and performance is akin to a failure of nerve.

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¹⁶ See Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 67-70. See also my comments on Schechner's claims in my “The Limits of Liminality.”

¹⁷ J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 63.

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