In and Out of Time: Festivals, Liminality and Communitas

Victor Turner

Victor Turner, internationally known anthropologist and University of Chicago faculty member, has long studied rituals, carnivals, pilgrimages, and celebrations. Some of his major contributions to contemporary thought derive from his analysis of these kinds of events.

Although festivals have been celebrated throughout history to fulfill human needs, anthropologists have only recently begun to analyze their functions in contemporary societies. Dr. Turner's work ranks in the forefront of this movement.

Briefly, Turner sees these occasions and events like them as existing both in and out of the regular structure of society. In our daily lives, we fill certain social roles (husband, father, employee, etc.) and live according to social norms that structure our daily activities: how we eat, how we dress, etc. Festivals, carnivals, and other large social celebrations provide an arena in which we do not subscribe to our regular social roles. We meet with people we may not ordinarily meet with, and deal with others differently from the way we normally would. For instance, if you met your boss at a New Year's Eve party, you would talk to him much less formally than you would at work.

Turner calls this phenomenon "anti-structure" or, to use his more popular term, "communitas." When people are "outside" their regular social roles, while at a festival, or between roles during a rite of transition (e.g. a man during his wedding ceremony is neither "single" nor "married"), Dr. Turner characterizes them as "liminal," that is, "betwixt and between" their regular social roles. Communitas most often occurs when there is a congregation of liminal people, and conversely, liminality is a primary condition for this generation of the feelings of oneness and flow that characterize "communitas" or community.

The 1978 Festival of American Folklife is in a sense an example of liminality, a gathering together of many, often disparate, communities for the purpose of meeting together and enjoying themselves apart from their usual social roles.

—Jack Santino, *Staff Folklorist*

Liminality

Liminal people or "threshold people" are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.

Communitas

What is interesting about liminal phenomena for our present purposes is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in rites of transition, with a "moment in and out of time," and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. It is as though there are here two major "models" for human interrelatedness. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less." The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.

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> Spontaneous communitas is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition.

Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low. No doubt something of this thinking, a few years ago, lay behind Prince Philip's decision to send his son, the heir apparent to the British throne, to a bush school in Australia for a time, where he could learn how "to rough it."

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Spontaneous communitas may arise unpredictably at any time between human beings who are institutionally reckoned or defined as members of any or all kinds of social groupings, or of none. Just as in preliterate society the social and individual developmental cycles are punctuated by more or less prolonged instants of ritually guarded and stimulated liminality, each with its core of potential communitas, so the phase structure of social life in complex societies is also punctuated, but without institutionalized provocations and safeguards, by innumerable instants of spontaneous communitas.

But there is no specific social form that is held to express spontaneous communitas. Rather is it expected best to arise in the intervals between incumbencies of social positions and statuses, in what used to be known as "the interstices of the social structure." In complex industrialized societies, we still find traces in the liturgies of churches and other religious organizations of institutionalized attempts to prepare for the coming of spontaneous communitas. This modality of relationship, however, appears to flourish best in spontaneously liminal situations—phases betwixt and between states where social-structural role-playing is dominant, and especially between status equals.

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Spontaneous communitas is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition. The moment a digging stick is set in the earth, a colt broken in, a pack of wolves defended against, or a human enemy set by his heels, we have the germs of a social structure. This is not merely the set of chains in which men everywhere are, but the very cultural means that preserve the dignity and liberty, as well as the bodily existence, of every man, woman, and child. There may be manifold imperfections in the structural means employed and the ways in which they are used, but, since the beginnings of prehistory, the evidence suggests that such means are what makes man most evidently man. This is not to say that spontaneous communitas is merely "nature." Spontaneous communitas is nature in dialogue with structure, married to it as a woman is married to a man. Together they make up one stream of life, the one affluent supplying power, the other alluvial fertility.

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Communitas is a fact of everyone's experience, yet it has almost never been regarded as a reputable or coherent object of study by social scientists. It is, however, central to religion, literature, drama, and art, and its traces may be found deeply engraven in law, ethics, kinship, and even economics. It becomes visible in tribal rites of passage, in millenarian movements, in monasteries, in the counter-culture, and on countless informal occasions.

Major liminal situations are occasions on which a society takes cognizance of itself, or rather where, in an interval between their incumbency of specific fixed positions, members of that society may obtain an approximation, however limited, to a global view of man's place in the cosmos and his relations with other classes of visible and invisible entities. Also, importantly, in myth and ritual an individual undergoing passage may learn the total pattern of social relations involved in his transition and how it changes. He may, therefore, learn about social structure in communitas.

Now men who are heavily involved in jural-political, overt, and conscious structure are not free to meditate and speculate on the combinations and oppositions of thought; they are themselves too crucially involved in the combinations and oppositions of social and political structure and stratification. They are in the heat of the battle, in the "arena," competing for office, participating in feuds, factions, and coalitions. This involvement entails such affects as anxiety, aggression, envy, fear, exultation, an emotional flooding which does not encourage either rational or wise reflection. But in ritual liminality they are placed, so to speak, outside the total system and its conflicts; transiently, they become men apart—and it is surprising how often the term "sacred" may be translated as "set apart" or "on one side" in various societies. If getting a living and struggling to get it, in and despite of a social structure, be called "bread" then man does not live "by bread alone."

Communitas is, existentially speaking and in its origins, purely spontaneous and self-generating. The "wind" of existential communitas "bloweth where it listeth." It is essentially opposed to structure, as antimatter is hypothetically opposed to matter. Thus, even when communitas becomes normative its religious expressions become closely hedged about by rules and interdictions—which act like the lead container of a dangerous radioactive isotope. Yet exposure to or immersion in communitas seems to be an indispensable human social requirement. People have a real need, and "need" is not for me a dirty word, to doff the masks, cloaks, apparel, and insignia of status from time to time even if only to don the liberating masks of liminal masquerade. But they do this freely.

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In *The Ritual Process,* I suggested that history itself seems to have its discernible liminal periods, which share certain distinctive features, between relatively stabilized configurations of social relations and cultural values. Ours may well be one of them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This article was excerpted from several of Dr. Turner's articles. Readers interested in further reading are directed to the following works of Dr. Turner.

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