

BOOK REVIEWS / RECENZIÓK

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Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality. Agnes HORVATH – Bjørn THOMASSEN – Harald WYDRA (eds.). Berghahn Books, 2015, 256 pp.

The aim of the editors with this volume was ‘to explore the methodological range and fertility of an anthropological concept’ on the one hand, and to ‘systematically apply this concept to various concrete cases of transformation in social and political environments’ (p.1). The concept of liminality, which the contributors of this volume explore through a wide range of disciplinary, theoretical and historical contexts, is a powerful tool of analysis, a ‘prism through which to understand transformations in the contemporary world’ (p. 1), a tool with which the paradoxes of globalization—of being both more interconnected and more divided—can be further explored to advance knowledge of problems at the intersection of anthropology and political studies. According to the contributors, the current global crises ‘demand a new mode of theorizing, which provides tools for understanding the combination of cognitive, affective, emotional and ‘irrational’ dimensions of crisis situations (p. 2). This volume works towards that aim by problematizing the dichotomy between order and disorder and suggesting, that ‘seemingly irrational conditions of liminality have logics of their own’ (p. 2).

Papers in this volume are divided into three parts. In Part I (*Framing Liminality*) Arpad Szakolczai and Bjørn Thomassen discuss the anthropological origins of liminality (Ch. 2) and some kin concepts in philosophy and sociology (Ch. 1). Not only do they provide a historical overview of the concept and its use (going as far back as van Gennep’s *Rites de Passage* (pp. 42–44), and not only do they find connections through the works of Dilthey, Kant, and an etymological analysis of the proto-Indo-European root **per* to Plato’s *Philebus* and to *aperion* (the famous ‘first word’ of Greek philosophy), but they also engage theoretically with it in outlining the analytical dimensions of thinking with liminality in order ‘to meet the real trickster-induced challenges that we increasingly face’ (p. 35)

Part II (*Liminality and the Social*) comprises five chapters in which the authors discuss liminality’s applicability to social processes. Echoing Szakolczai’s ideas, the figure of the Trickster is central to Agnes Horvath’s discussion of liminal situations as instances of dissolving identities and building new ones (Ch. 4). In her study of the production of science, she argues, that whereas most everyday liminal moments are ‘unforced,’ once ‘knowledge is acquired about the transformative power of liminal situations, that knowledge can also be deployed to purposefully create liminality’ (p. 89). Peter Burke’s (Ch. 7) analysis of the everyday rites of Louis

XIV at Versailles parallels Horvath's argument in describing the theatrical aspects of identity construction in politics (in this case, the creation of a king). Capturing another aspect of liminality, in Chapter 3 Bernhard Giesen draws attention to how spaces of ambivalence and hybridity are fundamental to sustaining social reality in that they transcend 'the successful ordering and splitting of the world into neat binaries' (p. 61) and thus drive the process of social communication (p. 62). Stephen Mennell (Ch. 6) discusses liminal space and the creation of identity from another perspective: that of the ever-shifting frontier. In his understanding, the gradual breaking down of ever-newer frontiers was an important aspect of the creation of American identity through the westward expansion. He analyses both the actual suspension of limits in order to facilitate a 'passage through,' and the later perception of it as a *rite de passage* eventually culminating in the 'successful completion of the transition' (p. 112). Michel Dobry's piece considers the analytical and methodological potential of grasping revolutions or political transitions through the lens of liminality (Ch. 5). He proposes an alternative approach, which he calls the hypothesis of continuity (p. 93), suggesting that critical events should not be given a 'special methodological treatment' (p. 93), as such 'methodological exceptionalism' (pp. 94–95) is, in fact, a major impediment to understanding those processes and to clarifying what can be considered specific or particular to such seemingly extraordinary phenomena.

The chapters in Part III (*Liminality and the Political*) deal with the more political dimensions of liminality, highlighting how the prism that this concept offers benefits the analysis of seemingly chaotic processes of intense social transformations. Both Camil Roman (Ch. 8) and Mark Peterson (Ch. 9) examine revolutions as a liminal experience, but whereas in case of the French Revolution Roman can pinpoint the trial and execution of Louis the XVI as key elements to the consolidation of a new democratic community and a successful transition from the weakening monarchic system, Peterson—in his discussion of another social drama, the Egyptian revolution—emphasizes how the difficulty of 'closing' lead to dozens of attempts to reconstitute the experience of antistructure from those eighteen days in Tahrir Square. The metacommentaries that constitute multiple versions of what the 'real' uprising was, construct moments of meaning in the experience of the ongoing revolution (p. 179). Following these two case studies, in chapter 10 Harald Wydra analyses what he terms the 'authority vacuum' in liminal situations, revealing the two paradoxes of democracy: the permanent dialogue between the democratic order and its underlying latent authority vacuum, and the fact that the strong anti-authoritarian impulses call for a center of authority (p. 186). In joining in the discourses about postsocialism, Richard Sakwa (Ch. 11) discusses the postcommunist era as liminal in two ways: the lack of a stable new order on the one hand, and failure of the rising powers to maintain a consistent critique of the hegemonic system on the other (p. 207). In doing so, he complements the arguments of scholars who argue against post-socialism as being a transitory period

(see HANN, Chris M. – HUMPHREY, Caroline – VERDERY, Katherine, Introduction: Postsocialism as a Topic of Anthropological Investigation, In HANN, Chris M. (ed.) *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London, Routledge, 15–21.) with a reflection on its liminality in the characteristic of continuously building and breaking of boundaries. In the final chapter (Ch. 12) Maria Mäklsoo discusses the analytical challenges of the concept of liminality to international relations by questioning the very logic of opposing an isolated ‘international political realm’ with a functionally defined ‘logic of anarchy.’ Her project has fundamental implications for the traditional categorization of actors and the dynamics of the ‘politics of belonging, becoming and recognition’ (p. 227).

Although all contributors stress the necessity of understanding liminality as a concept with deep roots in the discipline of anthropology, it is precisely through the interdisciplinary insights they provide that the chapters of this book are a welcome addition to endeavors for further work with this analytical tool. They certainly give new perspectives to anthropologists in furthering the theoretical and analytical potential of this notion beyond the study of traditional rites of passage. In a world of accelerating change, revolutions, dissolving ideas of modernity and democracy, global crises and blurring borders and realities of what we understand as community and society, liminality proves to be a useful tool for perceiving transition and the dynamics of boundaries, one that can also provide a fresh perspective to understand the increasing need to define everything in terms of ‘identity’.