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HAL Authorization

**Horvath, Agnes, Bjørn Thomassen and Harald Wydra (eds.). 2015. *Breaking Boundaries. Varieties of Liminality*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books. vi + 255 pp. Hb.: \$110.00/£68.00. ISBN: 9781782387664.**

The contributions collected in this book are all attempts to apply the notion of “liminality” to various situations in time and space. Forged by Arnold van Gennep at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developed by Victor Turner half a century later, the notion of liminality is once again gaining interest among anthropologists and beyond. It is understood here as a ‘fundamental human experience’ (p. 3): according to the editors, ‘liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes’ (p. 2). The goal of the editors and authors is then to show that this notion, derived from the analysis of the rites of passage, can become an analytical tool for disciplines other than anthropology and allow to interpret and explain a whole range of other situations, particularly in the political sphere. The volume is, in this sense, an updated version of an issue of *International Political Anthropology* published in 2009: eight of the twelve contributions are elaborated versions of articles previously published in this issue.

The case studies are mainly located in Europe, with an incursion into the United States (Mennell) and one into Egypt (Peterson), and mainly cover the modern and contemporary periods (from the reign of Louis XIV until today, with an exception for ancient and medieval alchemy (Horvath)).

The volume is organised into three parts. The first contains two articles aimed at returning the notion of liminality to its theoretical context: Arpad Szokolczai is interested in liminality and related notions in philosophy and sociology, while Bjorn Thomassen looks back on its origins in anthropology. Both articles provide a useful introduction to the history of the notion of liminality and to related theoretical issues.

The second part explores how liminality can be applied to “social processes”: a purpose which may seem rather vague. Indeed, the articles that compose it form a rather eclectic ensemble: Bernd Giesen wonders about the “in-between”, that is to say, the third term which is always inserted between the terms of binary structuralist oppositions but which, according to him, is often excluded from the analysis. He proposes a “sociology of ambivalence” that he applies to four objects: garbage, monsters, victims, and seduction. Agnes Horvath proposes to interpret alchemy, as a forerunner of metallurgy, as an implementation of liminality: she introduces the idea of ‘forced liminality,’ conceived as a manipulation to change matters or objects from one state to another, and extends it to the political domain by speaking of ‘political alchemy,’ meaning ‘the way artificially induced liminal situations can facilitate the technological shaping of identities’ (p. 88). Michel Dobry proposes analysing crisis situations (especially political crises), not as moments requiring a suspension of the tools used for the analysis of normal situations, which he calls “methodological exceptionalism”, but as to be thought within the “hypothesis of continuity”. He then puts forward, in order to give an account of these situations, the idea of a fluidity or plasticity of structures and that of the ‘desectorization of the social space’ (p. 101). If one feels a certain proximity of these ideas with the notion of liminality pre-

sented in the other texts of the volume, one can regret that this proximity is not directly discussed by the author.

Stephen Mennell, meanwhile, applies the notion of liminality to the American “frontier”, the one that, in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, moved the limit between civilisation and barbarism towards the West. Inspired by Norbert Elias, he observes the extent to which individuals develop particular skills in the context of the “frontier” and attempts to articulate liminality with the notion of the “civilizing process”. Particularly stimulating, this rapprochement is however not pushed enough. The same could be said of Peter Burke’s article on the passage between the private and the public at the court of Louis XIV, which is inspired by Erving Goffman’s writings on the presentation of self and which offers very interesting reflections on the way in which liminality makes it possible to rethink the notion of metamorphosis or the opposition between artificiality and naturalness, and which introduces the notion of “liminal person” applied to huissiers and servants: the six small short pages of the article are not sufficient to develop these stimulating proposals. (What, for example, of the relationship between the “liminal person” and the trickster discussed by Szokolczai in the first part of the volume?).

The third part deals more directly with the field of politics, already largely present in the texts of the second. Its composition is more coherent and seems to indicate that the field of politics lends itself particularly well to analyses using the notion of liminality. Two texts first offer a rereading of revolutionary events in terms of liminality: Camil Francisc Roman focuses on the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793 by showing how liminality can restore its significance, as well as of the trial from which it derives, whereas it is generally presented as a marginal aspect in the historiography of the French Revolution. Mark Allen Peterson interprets the Egyptian revolution of 2011 relying on the notions of “*communitas*” and “social drama” borrowed from Victor Turner. The next two articles focus on liminal periods rather than moments of crisis in themselves: Harald Wydra analyses the transition from monarchy to democracy as a liminal moment: more precisely, it is the vacuum of power which constitutes the liminal conditions in which the idea of democracy, as a tendency to subvert hierarchies and established structures, emerges. Drawing on the work of Claude Lefort on the “empty place of power”, he develops analyses that shed light on the role of ritual, violence, sacrifice and the figure of the victim in democratic regimes. Richard Sakwa sees the end of the communist era as opening a liminal period that characterises the 21<sup>st</sup> century: not only does the end of communist regimes not lead to a stable new order, neither economic nor political, but it marks the end of eschatological visions of the future. To a liminality of transformation, which involves the passage from one state to another, he opposes a liminality of change, ‘without meaning, purpose or direction’ (p. 211). His approach to liminality in relation to temporality is particularly stimulating. Finally, Maria Mälksoo questions in a very relevant way the possibility of applying the notion of liminality to the theory of international relations by showing how such an approach can renew this disciplinary field.

The editors of the volume defend themselves from wanting to impose a homogeneous and normative vision of liminality and, indeed, what emerges from the volume as a whole is the “variety” of the uses of the notion, so much so that we come to regret

the absence of a conclusion or an afterword that would attempt nevertheless to identify some common directions or divergences of all the texts. The book remains however highly recommendable for its theoretical perspectives and for offering a rich dialogue between anthropology and other social sciences.

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