

The Uses and Meanings of Liminality

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Abstract

This article introduces the work of Arnold van Gennep and traces the intellectual history of the concept of liminality. After considering the relative neglect to which van Gennep's work was exposed until Victor Turner's "discovery" of van Gennep in the 1960s, the article indicates different fields or topic areas in which the concept of liminality may be applied. In reference to liminal periods undergone by whole societies, the article raises a series of questions concerning possible problems in applying the concept of liminality in fields different from its origin, i.e. ritual passages in small-scale societies. Finally, the article raises a central question that was indeed posed by Max Weber, although with a different terminology, concerning the relationship between liminal experiences and the establishment of permanent structures, the "lasting effects" of answers produced in "extra-ordinary moments": the extent to which "structure" or "order" is indeed always born in liminality.

Keywords: history of anthropology, liminality, structure, Arnold van Gennep, Émile Durkheim, Victor Turner.

Histories of knowledge are shaped by the travels that concepts or ideas make, changing meaning and purpose as they migrate from one discipline to another, and become inserted in new discourses, productively going beyond their delimited empirical beginnings while opening up new fields of enquiry and spaces of imagination. This article is about the travels that the concept of liminality has made since it was introduced in anthropology by Arnold van Gennep in 1909; a concept that was introduced to analyse the middle stage in ritual passages and now considered by some to be a master concept in the social and political sciences writ large.

The aim of the paper is to sketch an intellectual history of a concept, but with a larger purpose. Liminality is indeed not *any* concept. Liminality does not and cannot "explain". In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome. Liminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and "reality" itself, can be carried in different directions. But for precisely these reasons, the concept of liminality has the potential to push social theory in new directions. Liminality may be as central a concept to the social sciences as both "structure" and "practice", as it serves to conceptualize moments where the relationship between structure and agency is not easily resolved or even understood within the, by now classical, "structuration theories", as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens. In liminality, the very distinction between structure and agency ceases to make meaning; and yet, in the hyper-reality of agency in liminality, structuration takes place. As will be indicated below, van Gennep's discovery of liminality was tied to an experientially based social scientific project, a "view" still relevant for consideration and elaboration, even beyond the work of Victor Turner.

A hundred years of liminality: reconsidering van Gennep's *Rites de Passage*

...at least all that is collected will be saved from oblivion and they will be grateful to us in one hundred years... (van Gennep in a letter to Jean Baucomont in 1933; Zumwalt, 1982: 3).

Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957) published *Rites de Passage* (1960 [1909]) exactly a century ago, having finished and written the preface to the book in late 1908. Van Gennep himself considered the book a break-through, resulting from an inner illumination:

I confess sincerely that though I set little store by my other books, my *Rites de Passage* is like a part of my flesh, and was the result of a kind of inner illumination that suddenly dispelled a sort of darkness in which I had been floundering for almost ten years (cited in Belier, 1994: 146).¹

The fact that a conference was dedicated entirely to the concept of liminality and culture change in 2009 (the conference that led to the special issue of this volume) is significant. One can safely take both the conference and this volume to be a celebration of van Gennep. However, the fact that what is possibly (?) the first conference dedicated to liminality comes after a hundred years of intellectual history probably also indicates that the potentiality of that concept was for a long time left unexplored. By celebrating van Gennep in 2009 we also deplore the partial oblivion to which his life-work has been exposed.

In *Rites of Passage* van Gennep started out by suggesting a meaningful classification of all existing rites. He distinguished between rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another from those which mark transitions in the passage of time (e.g. harvest, new year), whereupon he went on to explore “the basis of characteristic patterns in the order of ceremonies” (1960: 10). Stressing the importance of *transitions* in any society, van Gennep singled out *rites of passage* as a special category, consisting of three sub-categories, namely *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*. Van Gennep called the middle stage in a rite of passage a *liminal period* (ibid: 11). He called transition rites *liminal rites*, and he called rites of incorporation *postliminal rites*. Van Gennep also noted that the rites of separation, transition, and incorporation are not equally important or elaborated in specific rituals, and that the tripartite structure is sometimes reduplicated in the transitional period itself (ibid): in liminality proper, the sequence of separation, transition and incorporation is often present. It would be wrong to accuse van Gennep of reductionism. By no means did he try to press all ritual forms into one explanatory framework. He simply noted an underlying pattern in rites that marked a passage from one state to another, without taking away or reducing all the other aspects or “individual purposes” that such rites may *also* have (ibid). In other words – and this is important to stress – van Gennep’s work cannot be used directly to argue for any specific *theory* of rites. Van Gennep detected a pattern, a sequence, a ritual form. The ritual pattern was apparently universal: all societies use rites to demarcate transitions. Van Gennep was right.

The universality of the tripartite structure is not to be underestimated. Anthropological claims to universality have been few indeed, as a main aim of the discipline often was to demonstrate cultural diversity. There were therefore good reasons to expect that van Gennep's study and careful classification of rites would become an instant classic. And yet, this simply did not happen. Despite rather positive reviews in British and American Journals, the framework proposed by van Gennep was neglected in subsequent scholarship. In Durkheim's most important anthropological work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (from now on abbreviated as EFRL), published in 1912, and written in the period when van Gennep's work had been made public, ritual was indeed also singled out as central to the constitution of not only religion but also society itself. However, Durkheim made no use of the terms or distinctions suggested in *Rites de Passage*. Worse than that, Durkheim did not even find it worthwhile to *discuss* van Gennep. The disregard of van Gennep's work is even more startling given the fact that van Gennep had in 1906 published (in Paris) a book on Australian aboriginal religion, entitled *Mythes et legends d'Australie*, i.e. a whole book dedicated to the ethnographic case study that made up the entire argument of EFRL. Moreover, EFRL carried the subtitle *Le système totémique en Australie*, and van Gennep had in 1904 published his first book on exactly totemism, *Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar*, a book that Marcel Mauss had proofread and contributed to, and that contained an important theoretical discussion of totemism.

How are we to understand this disregard? Why, more generally, was van Gennep kept away from French academic circles? In the *Introduction* written by Solon T. Kimball to the English translation of *Rites de Passage*² it was suggested that the general failure to include van Gennep's contribution had to do with the fact that later authors on religion (among them Durkheim) were interested in "quite other subjects" than the ones treated in van Gennep's work (Kimball, 1960: xi). This, however, is plainly not correct, for van Gennep's book not only contains a masterly comparative analysis of existing ethnographic data that could not be bypassed; his analytical framework alone would have been relevant to *anyone* studying religion and ritual. While the publication of the book in English made van Gennep a "new classic" with half a century of delay, the *Introduction* certainly did not facilitate a proper reception, for it bypassed how and why van Gennep had been ostracized by the academic world, and how his theoretical project differed from that of Durkheim and his followers. The *Introduction* does not really place the book within van Gennep's academic and intellectual trajectory. That trajectory has not even today been fully reconstructed,³ while van Gennep's career from the 1920s would remain reserved to the narrow circles of mainly French folklorists.

The explanation for van Gennep's lack of status clearly has to do with academic power politics, and with Durkheim as a central figure. As Zumwalt (1982: 8) plainly states, "van Gennep's position outside French academic life can best be understood against the background of Durkheim's struggle to build and fortify his sociology". Durkheim saw van Gennep as a competitor. Van Gennep never got an academic position in France, despite his impressive list of publications: the bibliography compiled by his daughter contains 437 titles (Ketty van Gennep, 1964). Durkheim's EFRL, on the other hand, became the classic of the field, the foundational statement for thinking about religion, ritual, and society - and that until today.

In retrospect, one can only regret this. Van Gennep had written an elegant book, analytically sophisticated, simple but powerful, and exemplified by reference to a rich variety of ethnographic case studies described with wonderful detail, building on the available ethnographic data and convincingly comparing ritual forms at all “levels of development”, without reducing them all to one “function”. Moreover, van Gennep here, as elsewhere, showed an intimacy with the theoretical and empirical literature on religion and society in the major European languages, including French, German, English, Russian, Italian, Polish and Flemish (among the 18 languages that he mastered⁴). This was hardly the case with Durkheim, who mostly limited himself to the French and British literature, and who seemed far keener to demonstrate the validity of his own ready-to-use theoretical approach. Durkheim’s account of Australian aboriginal society was rather schematic and, let us admit, somewhat boring to read.

In his review of EFRL written in 1913, van Gennep quite plainly stated that Durkheim’s views of primitive peoples and simple societies were “entirely erroneous” (van Gennep in Zumwalt, 1982: 6). Van Gennep also said that Durkheim demonstrated a complete lack of critical stance towards his sources (collected by traders and priests), naively accepting their veracity. Van Gennep knew the sources, for he had used the same ones for his 1906 book. Once again, van Gennep was right. Durkheim was not an ethnographer, and his own insistence upon using “facts” and “observable social phenomena” for theory building was grossly violated, here as elsewhere. But van Gennep paid the price. Realizing van Gennep’s outcast position in French intellectual life, yet well aware of his brilliance, his friends would come to know him as “the hermit of Bourg-la-Reine” (Zumwalt, 1982). He worked in solitude for most of his life.

Arnold van Gennep and the lost foundations of anthropology

However, and much more importantly, van Gennep’s outcast position also had much to do with his theoretical and methodological approach, which was indeed quite different from that of Durkheim. Kimball, in his *Introduction to Rites of Passage*, identified van Gennep as a member of a generation of French sociologists inspired by positivism, and suggested that van Gennep be seen as an example of French scholars like Mauss, Hubert, and Durkheim who were collectively developing a functionalist approach (Kimball, 1960: vii). This contextualization of van Gennep’s work is both right and wrong.⁵

Van Gennep’s relationship to Durkheim and his students was tight and complex, before it suffered a final split. Van Gennep had studied *sciences religieuses* with Léon Marillier. Upon Marillier’s sudden death in 1901, Marcel Mauss became van Gennep’s teacher and mentor, and therefore closely followed van Gennep in the work towards his first book, his “thesis”, *Tabou et Totémisme à Madagascar*, published in 1904. Van Gennep was clearly a promising scholar, someone potentially very close to the Durkheimians. In *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep built on the works by Mauss, Hubert, and Hertz. Mauss certainly knew all of van Gennep’s work. He wrote a critical review of *Tabou et Totémisme*, but van Gennep reacted very positively to the critique, and thanked Mauss for having signalled his errors of interpretation (Zumwalt, 1982: 4).

Mauss wrote a short, critical review of *Rites de Passage* in *L'année Sociologique* (Mauss, 1910), blaming van Gennep for presenting a myriad of ethnographic and historical facts in a random way, “une randonnée à travers l'histoire et l'ethnographie” (see Belier, 1994: 148). It is difficult to assess whether the review expressed Mauss' own reading, or whether he felt forced into defending the Durkheimian position. As late as 1913, Mauss positively reviewed van Gennep's Algerian ethnography (ibid).⁶ 1913 was also the year when van Gennep launched another and more fierce attack on Durkheim, in his review of EFRL. The dispute between van Gennep and the Durkheimians would soon become irreconcilable, and from 1924 onwards *L'Année Sociologique* stopped reviewing van Gennep's work. It was from exactly this period that van Gennep turned to folklore. This was not an abandoning of anthropology, for van Gennep never perceived folklore and ethnology to be different disciplines. Rather, it was probably a realistic calculation that this was the only way in which he could be allowed to make at least a limited impact, and maybe even the only way to get published in French. Without ever holding an academic position in France,⁷ van Gennep would become known as the father of French folklore, but his relevance for anthropology and sociology was practically annulled. In short, van Gennep's project was alternative to Durkheim's. But what was his project?

A full answer to this question is beyond the limits of this paper, but it is important to note that van Gennep *did* have a project. In many ways the project did share affinities with that of Durkheim and his students. Van Gennep wanted to create an empirical social science focused on the systematic, in-depth study of material and symbolic culture among living peoples (this was roughly the definition of ethnology provided in van Gennep 1913). In order to establish such a terrain, van Gennep found it necessary to decouple ethnology and ethnography from physical anthropology, and also from the study of history, or “cette manie horrible de subordonner l'étude de présent à celle du passé” (van Gennep quoted in Zerilli, 1998b: 152). For van Gennep, true enough, habits and practices could not be derived from their historical “origin”, but had to be placed in their present reality.

Van Gennep was certainly inspired by the (indeed Comtean) French social science literature. Like other writers of his generation, he saw definition, classification, and systematic comparison as crucial. He paid an almost manic attention to ethnographic facts. A new social science had to be both systematic and empirical. Exactly like Durkheim and Mauss, van Gennep lamented that the social sciences still needed to build up a rigor and systematic approach that would give them the prestige and applicability of the natural sciences. Yet van Gennep was also quite sceptical about certain usages of scientific positivism, and he strongly criticized the Durkheimians on exactly these lines. Van Gennep was highly critical of Durkheim's comparative method, which, according to him, failed to compare like with like. He emphatically distanced himself from Durkheimian sociology, and instead proposed a social science methodology inspired by biology, “une biologie sociologique”, as he would call it.

The “biology” to which van Gennep referred was not simply an allusion to the authority and objectivity of natural science, but most of all a stress on the importance of *direct observation*, and systematic gathering of data leading, step by step, to theory building. Moreover, van Gennep wanted social scientists to deal with *living facts*,

rather than “dead” and abstract social facts. Van Gennep was truly passionate about ethnographic details, real living details, artefacts, art techniques, paintings, beliefs, rites, production techniques, legends. He published widely on highly specialized topics, from weaving techniques to pottery making, and animal and property markings.⁸ He read literally everything available to him, in all the then existing anthropological and ethnographic journals. There was not a corner of the world that was not of interest to him. Belmont (1974: 68) goes as far as to say that, prior to 1914, Arnold van Gennep was the *only* real ethnologist in France. Moreover, far from only focusing on small-scale societies, van Gennep made systematic references to and comparisons with historical societies, like ancient Egypt, Rome, and Greece. He was an expert on Homer. There was indeed nothing man-made that did not catch his ethnographic curiosity. It is worth mentioning that van Gennep (again in contrast to Durkheim) conducted several rounds of fieldwork in Algeria (see Siboud 2004 for a contextual analysis). Moreover, much of his impressive (unfinished) nine-volume work on French folklore built on ethnographic data meticulously gathered by himself while travelling France.

In 1908 van Gennep created his own Journal, *La Revue des Études Ethnographiques et Sociologiques*, in which he published frequently. A second initiative indicative of van Gennep’s aborted attempt to create a new ethnographical/sociological science was the major conference held at Neuchatel in the summer of 1914, weeks before the outbreak of World War I. In these formative years of the social sciences, van Gennep saw an opportunity to mark the field, and to give it his imprint. Van Gennep had started to plan this major event the moment he got his first academic position in Switzerland in 1912. Around 600 social scientists attended the event, and van Gennep’s intentions were clearly programmatic. The debate topics concerned basic terminological and methodological issues, as well as attempts to delineate boundaries with neighbouring disciplines. Marcel Mauss was part of the French delegation, and himself gave a paper on taboo among the Baronga (Zerilli, 1998a has the details⁹). Mauss was, in that period, preparing a plan for ethnographic studies in France, and certainly understood the importance of van Gennep’s project. Anglo-Saxon anthropologists boycotted the event, wanting to set their own agenda. Van Gennep was aiming to establish a new disciplinary tradition of an international reach, and in this he failed. World War I broke out, and within a year van Gennep was once again without a job. His Journal closed down as well.

The Rites of Passage versus EFRL

As has been shown so far, van Gennep’s work can to a large extent be understood in contrast to the ambitions and intentions of Durkheim and the *Année Sociologique* group. This has some importance for understanding his terminology, and the crucial role the liminality concept had for him, even as he turned to folklore. A few concrete differences can be spelled out, using Durkheim’s EFRL as contrast to van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*.

In EFRL Durkheim started out with a series of analytical distinctions, arranging religious phenomena into two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites (1967:

34). Rather than looking at the forms or passages present in rites, Durkheim claimed that “rites can be defined and distinguished [...] only by the special nature of their object” (ibid). That “object”, says Durkheim outright, is defined via the beliefs that the rite expresses. And, of course, that belief, the “totem”, is to Durkheim nothing other than society itself.¹⁰ This suggestion pre-empted van Gennep’s more fine-tuned attention to forms and *patterns* in rites (van Gennep used the French term *schema* for what was translated into pattern). In terms of procedure the two works are very different. Durkheim established *a priori* categories as the units of his taxonomy, while van Gennep inferred these units from the structure of the ceremonies themselves.

Concerning the larger role of rites in society, Durkheim conceptually limited the transformative effects of rites, as he stressed the way in which rituals served to tie together individuals in mechanical social solidarity. For Durkheim, rites were simply the vectors by which individuals became socially determined as acting and thinking beings. Durkheim distinguished between religion as collective and magic as private. Durkheim here missed another crucial point about rites that van Gennep stressed throughout *The Rites of Passage*, namely the way in which they may act simultaneously at the individual and collective levels. Moreover, while neophytes undergo a process of undifferentiation as they are “annulled” as persons in the separation rituals, ritual passages are clearly also crucial moments for a process of *differentiation*, of age groups, of genders, of status groups, and of *personalities*. The use of specialized languages in ritual was to van Gennep a clear sign of this “differentiating procedure” (1960: 169). In Durkheim’s analysis, individuals simply dissipate into the social body.

This relates to another fundamental difference. Durkheim saw “individualism” as both an epistemological and a methodological “enemy” to combat, always arguing for the primacy of society.¹¹ Van Gennep always insisted that individuals make choices and affect social situations in *any* kind of society, and this even so among the Australian tribes invoked by Durkheim in EFRL. Van Gennep had made this a very direct critique of Durkheim already in the preface to his 1906 publication on Australian religion: “In reality, just as with us, in the Australian tribes it is the individual who invents and proposes modifications...” (van Gennep in Zumwalt 1982: 5). Van Gennep argued that Durkheim simplified everything as a “need of society”:

It is by an identical process of animation that one speaks to us of ‘the call of the fatherland’, or ‘the voice of the race’. M. Durkheim anthropomorphizes as well as defends society” (ibid, emphasis in the original).

In an age of rising nationalism and racism, these were strong words. To van Gennep, this abstract and reifying tendency was what made Durkheim an opponent to his own “biological sociology”, and the 1913 review of EFRL gave van Gennep the perfect opportunity to restate his position. Durkheim, said van Gennep, claimed to have found the “foundations of society” from a single religious institution (totemism), without realizing that this was just *one* very specific type of classification (and hardly the “first” or most elementary, even in an evolutionary sense), peculiar to this not-so-simple society. For the purposes of his theoretical construct, Durkheim had artificially reduced Australian society to a monocellular organism, devoid of agency:

Not having the sense of life, that is to say the biological and ethnographic sense, he makes phenomena and living beings into scientifically dissected plants, as in an herbarium (ibid).

In his *Introduction* to EFRL, Durkheim even made the hubristic (and untenable) claim to have solved the philosophical problem of knowledge. By grounding Kant's *a priori* in ethnography, in social divisions and categories, Durkheim argued to have established not only the foundation of society, but equally the foundation of how we can know things at all. Van Gennep made no similar claim, and could not have done so. Indeed, this was another point made in his 1913 review: Durkheim was pressing ethnographic data into a prefabricated and alien theoretical framework. However, van Gennep's approach *does* open up for an entirely different "foundation" of society (and arguably even of conceptual thought): namely in human experiences of, and responses to, liminality. Rather than following Kant, such a theory of foundation would have had to move completely outside a (neo-)Kantian framework, and not simply solve the problem as posed from within it. Van Gennep did *not* make such an attempt, but turned instead to folklore.¹² To some extent, it was with this that Victor Turner became engaged later in his career when he encountered the work of Dilthey.

In the first chapter of EFRL, Durkheim pushed forward his argument by a series of dichotomies: all religious beliefs can be placed in two categories, namely the profane and the sacred. But as we know, at the end of the day, the realm of the sacred is for Durkheim nothing but an expression of the profane in need of an "object" to worship. Van Gennep likewise singled out the sacred/profane distinction as important, but as he makes clear in the third sentence of the book, the very stark dichotomy between sacred and profane is indeed a product of post-Renaissance modernity (1960: 1), and not at all present in the same way in "semi-civilized" peoples, where the sacred is part of every act and thought (ibid: 3). Van Gennep proceeded to ground the similarities in ceremonies in the very fact of *transition*. Transitions from group to group or from one social situation to the next are a "fact of existence" (ibid). "The universe itself is governed by a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity", said van Gennep (ibid).¹³

Much more can be made of the comparison between Durkheim and van Gennep, but for the purposes of the current argument we can stop here: Durkheim established a framework of analysis positing ritual as a timeless *consolidation* of society, whereas van Gennep had proposed a more open-ended framework of analysis focusing on patterns, and positing *transition* as the central "fact of life". The point of departure for Van Gennep's approach was constituted by real human experiences, "living facts", and moments of transition, in contrast to Durkheim's social facts, which became "facts" exactly to the extent that they were *external* to the individual. These two very different points of departure have very different potential ramifications. One cannot help asking the counterfactual question: how would anthropology have looked like if van Gennep's work had become the classic in the field? One answer can be given with certainty: *very* different. More than that we cannot know.

Liminality: the merits and limits of Victor Turner

Because van Gennep never became established in French academic life, he also by and large failed to have an impact outside France.¹⁴ He did become an important figure in Swiss, and of course French, folklore. However, the discipline of folklore was never something with a large outreach. In post-Durkhemian anthropology, the concept of liminality was entirely absent. Apparently the only anthropologist of importance to discuss *Rites of Passage* before its translation in 1960 was Paul Radin in his *Primitive Religion* (1937). Radin positively referred to van Gennep's work on totemism (p. 203-204), and Chapter 5 of *Primitive Religion*, "The Crisis of Life and Transition Rites", was quite simply an application of van Gennep's framework.¹⁵

Van Gennep became known in Anglo-Saxon anthropology after 1960 with the translation of *Rites de Passage* and in the context of British anthropologists' renewed interests in theoretical developments within French anthropology. Rodney Needham and Edmund Leach, supported by Evans-Pritchard, inspired the translation of the most important classics of French anthropologists, like Marcel Mauss, Robert Hertz, Hubert and Mauss, and Durkheim. It was also Needham who translated and introduced van Gennep's "The Semi-Scholars" in 1967. The interest in French ethnology was very much due to the high status that Claude Lévi-Strauss and his structuralist approach had attained. Lévi-Strauss had recognized the value of van Gennep's early work in his book on totemism (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 4). It was van Gennep who had translated Frazer's book on totemism into French. Lévi-Strauss clearly saw van Gennep as a better starting point than Durkheim. Leach thought likewise. In his overview essay on ritual, Leach bluntly stated that "van Gennep's schema has proved more useful than Durkheim's" (1968: 522). This was new. Lévi-Strauss' (partial) recognition of van Gennep is not strange, for van Gennep always insisted that ceremonial patterns should be examined as wholes and that comparison should be based upon similarities in structure rather than upon content. Moreover, van Gennep paid great attention to systems of exchange, and may have inspired both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss more than has so far been recognized, and more than both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss themselves ever conceded. Chapter 3 in *The Rites of Passage* is entirely dedicated to ritualistic exchange of words, gestures, services, goods, slaves, and wives. In an article from 1974, Senn concluded that van Gennep "deserves a place as an early and significant structural folklorist" (Senn, 1974: 242).

While on various occasions Leach, Needham (1967), and Evans-Pritchard (1960) expressed sincere wonder as to why van Gennep had not been held in higher regard within French anthropology ("an academic disgrace", as Needham said; 1967: xi), they never went deeper into the question. Lévi-Strauss' "rediscovery" of van Gennep was constrained by his structuralist approach and search for laws of logic. This was certainly miles away from van Gennep's own attempt to establish a "biological sociology", a science studying *faits naissants*, i.e. cultural phenomena at their moment of occurrence. Lévi-Straussian structuralism used finished texts (myths, kinship terminologies, cooking recipes) as its data. Liminality makes sense only within social dramas as they unfold.

It was Victor Turner who re-discovered the importance of liminality. It was one of Turner's many merits to "liberate" van Gennep's framework from both the functionalist and structuralist straight-jackets, inserting van Gennep's book on ritual passages where it truly belongs: in a processual approach. During his fieldwork, Turner had read about van Gennep via the work of Henri Junod (Turner, 1985: 159). Turner stumbled upon van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* almost by chance during the summer of 1963 at a moment when he was himself in a liminal state, having resigned from Manchester and sold his house, but still waiting for his US visa which was delayed because of his refusal of armed military service during WWII. The Turners were staying at Hastings on the English Channel, living in "a state of suspense" (Edith Turner, 1985: 7). Turner literally lived at a threshold when he encountered van Gennep. In contrast to Lévi-Strauss and his British followers, Turner *experientially* recognized the importance of van Gennep's insight. The reading inspired him, on the spot, to write the essay "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", the famous chapter in his 1967 publication, *The Forest of Symbols*. Turner presented the paper once in America, in March 1964, when he had finally taken up his position at Cornell. This would be the first of his explorations into liminality.

In his analysis of Ndembu ritual, Turner (1967, 1969, 1974) showed how ritual passages served as moments of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up, and argued, against Durkheim (and Radcliffe-Brown), that rituals were much more than mere reflections of "social order". Van Gennep's framework complemented the term already introduced by Turner, "social drama". Turner's experience had been much similar to that of Gregory Bateson: while doing their fieldwork, both realized that their conceptual and methodological luggage was simply not adequate to explain what they were observing. Turner had been trained in functionalist anthropology, and his early work (1957) largely stayed within this tradition, analyzing schism and conflict as part of the social structure. Van Gennep's book further helped him to redirect his work beyond the functionalist paradigm.

The travels on which liminality went outside the study of ritual passages in small-scale societies, and in a way outside "anthropology proper", began in Victor Turner's own work. In his ethnographic accounts, Turner repeatedly identified parallels with non-tribal or "modern" societies, clearly sensing that what he argued for the Ndembu had relevance far beyond the specific ethnographic context, but without unfolding any systematic analysis or comparison. He became more explicit about such links toward the end of his life. Turner realized that "liminality" served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience. Turner came to identify his own project with the philosophy of Dilthey for this very reason (see for example Turner, 1982: 12-19; 1988: 84-97). This was indeed an important intellectual encounter, made late in Turner's life (see also Szakolczai, 2004: 69-72).

At the level of empirical application, Turner gave two concrete suggestions:

- a) In a famous article, “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: an essay in comparative symbology” (1982[1974]), Turner suggested that liminal experiences in modern consumerist societies to a large extent have been replaced by “liminoid” moments, where creativity and uncertainty unfold in art and leisure activities.
- b) In his work on the Christian pilgrimage (1978), Turner argued that pilgrimage shares aspects of liminality because participants become equal, as they distance themselves from mundane structures and their social identities, leading to a homogenization of status and a strong sense of *Communitas*.

The suggestions proposed in *From Liminal to Liminoid* had the largest effects on anthropology, as several of Turner’s students would draw inspiration from Turner and study art, theatre, literature, and “leisure”. In art and leisure we recreate “life in the conditional”, the playful. Turner became even more of a reference point in the 1980s and 1990s, as anthropology went through a “performative turn” with a focus on process. “Process” and “performance” were always crucial terms to Turner.

While recognizing the importance of Victor Turner’s insights, one should hesitate to simply follow him (and his students) here. First of all, the understanding of the liminal as relating in modern society primarily to art and leisure sidelines some of the clearly dangerous or problematic aspects of liminality. It is not irrelevant that Turner’s ideas first started to spread around 1968, and then became more widely known and used with the postmodernist turn of the 1980s. Turner’s (albeit hesitant) self-identification with the postmodernist turn certainly opened up space for a usage of the term that he would, or should, have warned against. Second, in his discussion of the liminoid, Turner seems to suggest an oversimplified dichotomy between symbolic systems of a “traditional” and a “modern” type, arguing that “we must distinguish between symbolic systems and genres which developed before and after the Industrial Revolution” (1982: 30). Third, in contrast to liminal experiences, liminoid experiences are optional and do not involve a resolution of a personal crisis or a change of status. The liminoid is a break from normality, a playful as-if experience, but it loses the key feature of liminality: *transition*. Fourth, by thus delimiting liminality, Turner underplayed the extent to which liminal moments or liminal experiences might be equally present in political or social transformations, i.e. outside “culture”, in the more narrow understanding of that term. Here Turner was probably influenced by the Parsonian version of anthropology as dealing with “symbol systems” or “comparative symbology”. Despite Turner’s frequent references to “complex society”, and his many allusions to the relevance of liminality for “macropolitics” (1988: 91), and despite his engagement with political anthropology (see Swartz, Turner and Tuden, 1966) his work remained largely a-political in character.

In this vein, Turner’s study of pilgrimage may in fact represent a more promising development. In this work, Turner tentatively suggested that a liminal state may become “fixed”, referring to a situation in which the suspended character of social life takes on a more permanent character (Turner, 1978). This was much in line with what Turner himself had suggested earlier, namely that in the monastic and mendicant

states of the world religions, transition had become a permanent condition (1969: 107). We shall return to this “institutionalization of liminality” further below.

Types of liminality

In Turner’s own words, liminality refers to any “betwixt and between” situation or object. It is evident that this understanding opens up space for possible uses of the concept far beyond that which Turner himself had suggested. Speaking very broadly, liminality is applicable to both space and time. Single moments, longer periods, or even whole epochs can be liminal. Liminal places can be specific thresholds; they can also be more extended areas, like “borderlands” or, arguably, whole countries, placed in important in-between positions between larger civilizations. Liminality can also be applied to both single individuals and to larger groups (cohorts or villages), or whole societies, or maybe even civilizations. These various dimensions of liminality can be spelled out very simply.

Experiences of liminality can be related to three different types of **subject**:

- 1) single individuals
- 2) social groups (like cohorts, minorities)
- 3) whole societies, entire populations, maybe even “civilizations”

The **temporal** dimension of liminality can relate to:

- 1) moments (sudden events)
- 2) periods (weeks, months, or possibly years)
- 3) epochs (decades, generations, maybe even centuries)¹⁶

The **spatial** dimension of liminality can relate to:

- 1) specific places, thresholds (a doorway in a house, a line that separates holy from sacred in a ritual, specific objects, in-between items in a classification scheme, parts/openings of the human body)
- 2) areas or zones (border areas between nations, monasteries, prisons, sea resorts, airports)
- 3) “countries” or larger regions, continents (meso-potamia, medi-terranean; Ancient Palestine, in between Mesopotamia and Egypt; Ionia in Ancient Greece, in between the Near East and Europe).¹⁷

The different dimensions within the above three areas can function together in a variety of combinations. Singling out *type of subject* and the *temporal dimension*, this model can be suggested:

Model 1. Types of liminal experiences

Time	Subject	Individual	Group	Society
Moment		Sudden event affecting one's life (death, divorce, illness) or individualized ritual passage (baptism, ritual passage to womanhood, as fx. among Ndembu)	Ritual passage to manhood (almost always in cohorts); graduation ceremonies, etc.	A whole society facing a sudden event (sudden invasion, natural disaster, a plague) where social distinctions and normal hierarchy disappear. Carnivals. Revolutions.
Period		Critical life-stages Puberty or teenage	Ritual passage to manhood, which may extend into weeks or months in some societies; Group travels.	Wars. Revolutionary periods.
Epoch (or life-span duration)		Individuals standing "outside society", by choice or designated. Monkhood. In some tribal societies, individuals remain "dangerous" because of a failed ritual passage. Twins are permanently liminal in some societies	Religious Fraternities, Ethnic minorities, Social minorities, Transgender Immigrant groups betwixt and between old and new culture Groups that live at the edge of "normal structures", often perceived as both dangerous and "holy"	Prolonged wars, enduring political instability, prolonged intellectual confusion; Incorporation and reproduction of liminality into "structures" Modernity as "permanent liminality"?

It should of course be stressed that these are analytical distinctions of a somewhat arbitrary nature. There is no absolute way of distinguishing "moments" from "periods", and the dimensions invoked could also be thought of as a continuum. Moreover, while this scheme identifies types of liminal *experience*, it by no means follows that all these experiences are demarcated with a transition *rite* – at least not the same kind of clearly recognizable and institutionalized rites with identifiable ceremony masters, as studied in the work of van Gennep.

If the dimensions of subject/space/time each have (at least) three basic dimensions, one could also bring in another variable, namely "scale", referring to the "degree" to which liminality is experienced, or, in other words, the intensiveness of the liminal moment or period. Liminal experiences can (and most often do) take place within a society where much of what goes on stays "normal". Sometimes, however, liminal experiences become intensified as the personal, group, and societal levels converge in liminality, over extended periods of time, and even within several spatial

“coordinates”. In other words, most experiences of liminality are circumscribed by some kind of frame, whereas others are closer to “pure liminality”, where both spatial and temporal coordinates are in play. One can or should not put this into any mathematical model, but it does seem meaningful to suggest *that there are degrees of liminality, and that the degree depends on the extent to which the liminal experience can be weighed against persisting structures.*¹⁸

Finally, one can add this distinction: liminal experiences can be “artificially produced” as in rituals, or they can simply happen, without anyone planning for it, as in natural disasters or the sudden disappearance of beloved persons. In a similar way, individuals can consciously search for a liminal position, standing outside normality. One could argue that this is what some artists or writers do. As a contrast, individuals or whole social groups may be thought of, or classified as liminal, even if they never “asked for” this position.

Applications of the concept of liminality: some examples

It is not possible here to provide a full overview of how and where the concept of liminality is currently being applied. The exercise is particularly impossible within anthropology, where the concept has gained enormous popularity within a variety of subfields, and broadly speaking together with the notion of “hybrid culture”. The concept, moreover, circulates within a variety of disciplines. At the level of the individual, liminality is used as a concept by some psychologists and therapists, and here the relevance speaks for itself: most (if not all) persons can recognize moments or periods in their lives as liminal, where the answers to the challenges one needs to face are simply not offered by any predefined “structure”. Liminality can also relate very fundamentally to world experience, indicating the limit between the sensible and the “subliminal” (the level below which a sensation ceases to be perceptible, but nonetheless real). One could indeed argue that decisive human experiences are all liminal in this “psychological sense”, and closely relate to Turner’s notion of “flow” (see Turner, 1982) that our rational language fails to express. Psychologists also make use of liminality-related concepts to categorize mental states, as for example in the concept of “borderline” persons.

To write from the interstices, from the in-between, can be recognized as a strategy in much postmodern or postcolonial literature. For Homi Bhabha (1994), for example, liminality relates to cultural hybridity. In much postmodern literature, the liminal positively has come to represent an interstitial position between fixed identifications. Liminality represents a possibility for a cultural hybridity that entertains *difference* without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. This is the most evident example of how liminality has become applied as a position from which to think without recognizing what van Gennep had indeed made clear: that liminality needs to end somehow.

Arguably, liminal experiences in modern societies are generated by more individualized types of “rites”, in line with a more general “individualization” process. Turner may of course be right that in modern consumer societies each individual seeks

as many out-of-the-ordinary “experiences” as possible. The increasing use of drugs in contemporary society may in fact indicate a need to “shake the routine” (Lenzi, 2009). At the level of the social group, liminal moments are indeed visible in a variety of ritual passages that reappear in modern societies, like graduation ceremonies, initiation rites in the military, etc. This has been well studied by anthropologists who took inspiration from Turner as they turned their gaze toward “modern society”, and as shown by Turner himself. This again was of course what van Gennep had argued already in 1909, and therefore goes without saying.

Liminality has also been developed in organizational theory (Kirkeby, 2001), and in approaches to business consultancy (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). One may also apply the notion of liminality to a whole series of minorities. Transsexuality, or any form of “transgender”, may be seen and experienced as liminal, as is indeed claimed in postmodernist gender theory. Here, the liminal position is again turned into a vantage point of articulating diversity (see for example Wilson, 2002). Minority groups may be seen as taking up liminal positions (willingly or not). To a degree, immigrant groups or refugees are liminal, being betwixt and between home and host, part of society, but sometimes never fully integrated. To an extent, this suggestion is not new at all. In his discussion of ethnic identity, Thomas H. Eriksen suggested the term “ethnic anomalies” for individuals or groups who are “betwixt and between” dominant ethnic categories, invoking in fact Turner’s vocabulary (1993: 62). Certain minority groups may indeed be somewhat like the neophytes as described by Turner: “The neophytes are sometimes said to ‘be in another place’. They have physical but not social reality, hence they have to be hidden, since it is a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there” (Turner, 1967: 97). This would be particularly evident for groups like stateless people or illegal immigrants.

Societal liminality and the collapse of order: the challenge to social and political theory

While all of the above usages of the term liminality may prove meaningful, the most far-reaching suggestion made in recent years relates to the wider claim that liminal situations can be applied to whole societies going through a crisis or a “collapse of order”. The importance of liminal experiences in large-scale societies has been suggested in Eisenstadt (1995), and has most systematically been developed by Arpad Szakolczai (2000, 2003, 2008a) to include both personal and collective liminality, temporal as well as spatial. Szakolczai also used the concept of liminality to analyze the life-works of thinkers such as Max Weber and Michel Foucault (Szakolczai, 1998). Most fundamentally, Szakolczai diagnosed modernity itself as “permanent liminality” (2000: 215-227).

The liminal periods here are to some degree identical to what has also been called “axial moments” or “axial renaissances” (Jaspers, 1953: 7). If so, the subject in question may indeed refer to larger civilizations. This is not at all a far-fetched suggestion. Karl Jaspers’ famous description of the axial age bears every element of liminality: it was an in-between period between two structured world-views and

between two rounds of empire building; it was an age of creativity where “man asks radical questions”, and where the “unquestioned grasp on life is loosened” (ibid: 3); it was an age of uncertainty, where possibilities lie open; it was a period where individuals rise to the test and new leadership figures arise; finally, referring to the spatial coordinates, the axial “leaps” all happened in in-between areas between larger civilizations, in liminal places: *not* at the centres, nor outside reach of main civilizational centres but exactly at the margins, and quite systematically so at that.

If historical periods can be considered liminal, it follows that the crystallization of ideas and practices that take place during this period must be given special attention. Once liminality ends the ideas and practices that have become established therein will tend to take on the quality of structure. According to such a view, history is not a continuous stream of action governed by a structure that changes only slowly, if at all. Rather, there are historical moments at which structure is loose, and there are other moments at which structure takes on the quality of *doxa*, where it becomes frozen. This would be in line with van Gennep’s view of “periodicity”. The playfulness of the liminality period is at one and the same time unstructured and highly structuring: the most basic rules of behavior are questioned, doubt and scepticism as to the existence of the world are radicalized, but the problematisations, the formative experiences and the reformulations of being during the liminality period proper, will feed the individual (and his/her cohort) with a new structure and set of rules that, once established, will glide back to the level of the taken-for-granted. During liminal periods, characterized by a wholesale collapse of order and a loss of background structure, agency is pushed to the forefront and reorientations in modes of conduct and thought are produced within larger populations. While in a way this is a straightforward suggestion, its consequences still need much more systematic discussion. It also seems that there is a great deal of resistance to encounter from historians and social theorists - and indeed also anthropologists.

Questions we need to ask

Some questions remain concerning the application of liminality in the analysis of the “collapse of order” within larger societies. Let us simply raise some of these questions.

- If the concept is applied to individual experiences in modern societies, and to large-scale societies, or even civilizations, how can we determine whether we are dealing with a “liminal moment”? This is more and something other than a trivial discussion of definitions. Universalizing definitions in this regard are probably useless, as liminality refers to human experience that cannot be put in boxes. Still, as the concept is now slowly entering social and political theory, it seems that there is a need to discuss the limits and modalities of its application, as there is an obvious risk of over-usage and inflation. We know when the Ndembu enter the liminal period: it is when they are walked out the village. But what if we talk about “Western civilization”?
- Can one distinguish between different “types” of liminal moments, is it a matter of “scale” - or is the search for typologies, as indicated above, equally mistaken? Since

liminal moments relate to *experiences* of liminality, should we place the emergence of liminality exclusively on the plane of such an experience, or could economic or socio-political measures also be taken into account? Or is it when these different dimensions of social life all are shaken (the political, the economic, the ideological) that we can apply liminality to the societal level? In some cases the liminal moment is seemingly obvious, as for example during political revolutions or during transitions from one type of system to another, or the collapse of a whole world order, like the collapse of communism. But it is clear that many situations are liminal to *some extent*, as we, by definition, live in a world of change. The situation is made even more intricate by the claim made by Szokolczai, that it is modernity itself that is permanently liminal.¹⁹

As we apply the concept to larger societies experiencing a “collapse of order” or a “dissolution of order”, a related question emerges: Is liminality experienced only by smaller groups (elites of some sort), by everybody, or is the diagnosis made *post hoc* by the analyst? Or does it simply depend on the situation or historical moment analyzed?

- This raises the question of *leadership* during liminal periods, and the kind of bonds established between leaders and their followers. The question was taken up very directly in the work of Agnes Horvath, in her analysis of political communication during communism (1998). In anthropological usage, liminality is closely connected to the development of *Communitas*, and for Victor Turner very positively so. How can the link between liminality and *Communitas* be understood in mass societies – and which complementary concepts, theories, or approaches are needed to make sense of this connection? It seems that very negative types of *Communitas* may also result from liminal moments, dominated by resentment, envy, and hate; but how and why do this happen?

- Another question concerns spirituality, and the question permeates all others. In anthropological case studies, liminal moments are characterized by very real spiritual experiences that profoundly shake the personality. This is of course an extremely delicate exercise and the reason why ceremony masters are always chosen with great care in tribal societies or in any religious group, and after repeated tests. The ritual passages that neophytes go through in most tribal societies are particularly vivid examples of real spiritual exercises that install a mixture of strength and humbleness in the person, a basic attitude toward life instilled together with the technical skills that are needed to perform as a person in one’s new role. It seems that this balance can easily be lost, in either direction: toward self-glorification or toward self-denial. The tension was, in a way, spelled out by Max Weber in his analysis of the religious rejections of the World and their directions, leading either toward “*Weltabwendung*” or “*Weltbeherrschung*”. If such “dislocations” can take place at the societal level, as liminal periods are confronted, we need to start a comparative study of how and why this can happen. In other words, we have to consider the possibility that ritual passages can go wrong, and produce effects of a very undesirable kind.

- In anthropological usage the liminal state is always clearly defined, temporally and spatially: there is a way into liminality and there is a way out of it. Members of the society are themselves aware of the liminal state: they know that they will leave it sooner or later, and have “ceremony masters” to guide them through the rituals. Compared to liminality in ritual passages, two evident differences appear when applied

to a wholesale “collapse” of order affecting an entire society: 1) the future is inherently unknown (as opposed to the initiate whose personal liminality is still framed by the continued existence of his home society, waiting for his re-integration). 2) There are no real ceremony masters, as nobody has gone through the liminal period before.

More than limiting the application of the concept, one could suggest that these two basic differences indicate a situation where liminal moments become extremely dangerous, creating the perfect scene for different sorts of self-proclaimed ceremony masters who claim to “have seen the future”, but who in reality establish their own position by perpetuating liminality and by emptying the liminal moment of real creativity, turning it into a scene of mimetic rivalry (see again Szakolczai, 2000: 218). This is exactly what Girard argued in *Violence and the Sacred* (1976) referring to situations where “degree is shaken” and distinctions cease to be meaningful. According to Girard, once a process of undifferentiation unfolds, the process of doubling threatens to spread, and can only be brought to a halt via sacrifice. In the last years of his life, Victor Turner came to recognize the theoretical importance of Girard (Turner, 1988: 34), and in the precise context of the ritual structure: crisis is contagious, and sometimes the “redressive machinery...fails to function” (ibid: 35), leading to “a reversion to crisis”. Exploring public liminality, Turner also made increasing usage of Bateson’s work on *play* and *frame*.

The permanentization of liminality

We have no way of knowing whether primitive initiations merely conserved lore.
Perhaps they also generated new thought and new custom. (Victor Turner).

The concept “permanentization of liminality” is close to Weber’s concept, “routinization of charisma”, which is again a deeply paradoxical but again *real* social process, lying at the very heart of practically any social or political or religious movement. As mentioned above, Turner himself introduced the term “institutionalization of liminality” in reference to monastic orders (1969: 107).

In ritual passages, liminality is followed by reintegration rituals that re-establish the order of the new personality as a part of the social order that he or she re-enters with a new role, stamped by the formative experience. This is a critical passage, but without reintegration liminality is pure danger. Hence, relating to crisis periods of larger societies where the social drama has no foregone conclusion, the question becomes: how is the liminal period dealt with, and how (if at all) is it ended? The question can again be posed in Weberian terms: how and when does a “routinization” or an “everydayinization” of the out-of-ordinary situations take place? And who will become the “carriers” of the new world-view that is eventually institutionalized?

The institutions that make up a society have been created to deal with an extraordinary situation only in order to become permanent. While this in a way is “normal”, the experience of being “stuck in liminality” is also highly critical. Using again van Gennep’s tripartite structure, Szakolczai argued (2000: 220) that there are

three types of permanent liminality, critically originating in the three phases of the rites of passage. “Liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases in this sequence [of separation, liminality, and reaggregation] becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame” (ibid). Szakolczai invoked a salient example for each type of permanent liminality: monasticism (with monks endlessly preparing the separation), court society (with individuals continuously performing their roles in an endless ceremonial game; see Burke, this volume), and Bolshevism (as exemplifying a society stuck in the final stage of a ritual passage). The first two suggestions build on the insights of Turner himself, Max Weber (and his study of the Protestant ethic) and Norbert Elias (and his study of court culture). The understanding of communism as a specific “third stage” type of permanent liminality can be sustained by pointing to the fact that “communism was a regime in which the Second World War never ended” (ibid: 223; Horvath and Szakolczai, 1992). Rather than healing the wounds and looking to the future, communist regimes sustained themselves by playing continuously on the sentiments of revenge, hatred, and suffering, “preventing the settling down of negative emotions” (ibid).

Concerning the role of leadership in liminal moments, it is certainly no coincidence that Turner kept coming back to the figure of the trickster as one of several (archetypical?) liminal figures. In one of his very last essays, “Body, Brain and Culture” Turner even suggested that the “slippery” Trickster is the figure that moves between the hemispheres of the brain (1988: 170), creating a real effect but erasing its trace. The analysis of the trickster as a particularly dangerous type of political leader that may emerge in liminal situations, as proposed by Agnes Horvath (1998; see also this volume), may well represent a break-through in our understanding of how liminal moments or periods may be carried in dangerous directions (Turner is close to saying this himself; 1985: 230).

While liminality is “unstructure”, a lack of fixed points in a given moment, it must at the same time be considered the *origin* of structure. In several places, Turner talked very explicitly of liminality as some kind of “original state”, the stuff out of which everything is born, that formless reality out of which forms emerge, the beginning of everything. And this is certainly how we have to understand the famous quote from “Betwixt and Between” (1967: 97):

Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.

Turner made this a general point about origins, and interestingly invoked Plato as an example. Turner called Plato a “speculative philosopher”, who himself acknowledged his philosophical debt to the teachings of the Eleusinian and Orphic initiations of Attica (ibid), and returned to this example several times in his break-through essay, “Betwixt and Between”.²⁰ We can leave aside Turner’s misreading of Plato as “speculative”. Turner seems to say that even our “rational” and “systemic” modes of thought and behavior have their origin in liminal experiences that are somehow

transformed into order and system. It would seem that we still need to say a whole lot more about that *somehow*.

Notes

¹ This assertion of his work was made by van Gennep in 1913, four years after its publication. The “10 years of darkness” referred to most certainly have to do with van Gennep’s personal life from 1897 to 1908 when the book was finished. Van Gennep’s marriage in 1897 led to a painful, final break with his parents. 1897 was also the year that van Gennep moved to Russian Poland, starting a new career as a teacher. Upon his return to Paris in 1901, van Gennep’s scholarly work progressed, but without a “ritual passage” to French academia.

² The Routledge paperback version of *The Rites of Passage* that appeared in 1977 dropped Kimball’s *Introduction*, although it still figured on the title page and in the table of contents. Kimball was in fact the person who had insisted on the translation of the book. No alternative introduction was written. A more nuanced introduction to the book was written for the Italian translation (see Remotti, 1981).

³ For the literature on van Gennep, one can refer to the work of Belmont (1974), Zumwalt (1982), Zerilli (1998a). For a discussion of the relationship between van Gennep and the *Année Sociologique* group, see Belier (1994). The complete works of Arnold van Gennep were assembled and introduced by his daughter, Kelly van Gennep (1964).

⁴ Besides having a natural talent for languages, and being raised in what was probably a bi- or trilingual family environment, van Gennep also developed his linguistic skills via his non-academic jobs. At a young age, van Gennep joined the diplomatic service, and from 1897 to 1901 he occupied a teaching position at a Polish *lycée*. In the examination process for the job, van Gennep translated from both Latin and Greek into Russian. From 1901 to 1908 van Gennep was head of translations at the French ministry of Agriculture, and to supplement his income he translated foreign-language works into French. Translation and publication were van Gennep’s main source of income for much of his life. Needless to say, van Gennep was interested in linguistics also at the theoretical level. Like Mauss (and Turner), but again in contrast to Durkheim, he paid great attention to etymology.

⁵ Here one cannot fail to notice the quite erroneous tendency to insert *Rites of Passage* as a *complementary* work to EFRL in standard anthropological reading lists on religion and ritual.

⁶ Mauss wrote this review in the same year that van Gennep published his highly critical review of EFRL, which was equally an attack on that Durkheimian school to which Mauss belonged. In his 1913 review, Mauss praises van Gennep for the incredible ethnographic effort and the analytical precision found in the work; this was exactly what van Gennep pointed out as fatal weaknesses in Durkheim’s EFRL. It does seem the case that Mauss nurtured much stronger sympathies for van Gennep than did his uncle. While Mauss and van Gennep disagreed on a series of theoretical and methodological issues, they shared the same passion for ethnographic studies, and seemed to have created the basis for a constructive dialogue. In 1903, Marcel Mauss had proofread and thoroughly commented upon van Gennep’s first book, *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar*, and in the preface van Gennep reserves the final thanks to “my friend Marcel Mauss” (Zumwalt, 1982: 4). Mauss’ 1913 review of van Gennep may even have been an attempt to mediate between van Gennep and Durkheim.

⁷ The only academic position van Gennep ever held was the (first) chair in “Swiss ethnography” at the University of Neuchâtel, a position he took up in 1912. However, in 1915 van Gennep was expelled from Switzerland because of his open criticism of the Swiss government and its pro-German attitudes during the war. Van Gennep had an awful habit of criticizing authorities.

⁸ In one of van Gennep’s short publications in *Man* (1909), he provides a one-page response to a question raised by a woman who had found a highly peculiar netting technique among the Bushmen, asking the readers of *Man* whether similar techniques were to be found elsewhere. It

becomes clear from van Gennep's response, that in order to understand the peculiarity of the technique, he had emulated the netting technique with a rope in his home apartment. It is also clear that van Gennep had a dictionary knowledge of the comparative study of net making.

⁹ The author wishes to thank Filippo Zerilli for a critical reading of a draft version of this essay.

¹⁰ Van Gennep had in fact taken issue with Durkheim's entire approach to totemism, and summed up his own position in 1920 (van Gennep, 1920).

¹¹ Belier (1994) argues, somewhat simplistically, that this difference in viewpoint was the reason why the Durkheimians could so easily disregard van Gennep. Belier seems to accept that we are left with a choice to study either the individual or collective level. As Marcel Mauss himself would come to realize (through his works on the notion of the person and on the techniques of the body), Durkheim's collectivist position was itself untenable. Rather than effectively sociologizing "Western individualism" (as Belier suggests), Durkheim may be said to have transposed the "closed self" to the level of society, replacing one "ideology" with another.

¹² Van Gennep rarely made references to what one might consider more purely philosophical debates, always arguing from the "ground" of available data. The only philosopher van Gennep mentions in *Rites of Passage* is Nietzsche, in the second last paragraph of the book. This is where van Gennep compares rectilinear to cyclical patterns, and notes how the circular order from life to death and death to life (the sequential order of the book itself) acquired a "psychological significance" in Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return (1960: 194). It is not entirely impossible that van Gennep's notion of a "biological sociology" was inspired by Nietzsche's project to establish a philosophy of and for life.

¹³ The parallel with nature inspired van Gennep to the beautiful closure of the book: "Finally, the series of human transitions has, among some peoples, been linked to the celestial passages, the revolutions of the planets, and the phases of the moon. It is indeed a cosmic conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great hymns of the universe". Here again the contrast to Durkheim is very stark: for him, human beings bestow order on "nature" from their self-created social order, a clearly Neokantian position. The style and content of Van Gennep's closing paragraph much more closely resembles the cosmology found in Plato's *Timaeus*.

¹⁴ Van Gennep had given a lecture tour in the United States and Canada in 1922; it is unclear how much of an impact he made. Upon his return, van Gennep fell ill and momentarily abandoned all his academic ambitions, settling down as a chicken-breeder in Southern France.

¹⁵ In Turner's own brief overview of the van Gennep reception (1985: 158-159), he mentions the work of E. D. Chappell and C. S. Cohn, who in their 1942 *Principles of Anthropology* discussed rites of passage; Turner also makes mention of scholarship in related disciplines which had applied van Gennep's scheme toward the analysis of individual development.

¹⁶ There might be a fourth category here, which is permanent liminality; however, since no liminality is absolutely permanent it can be contained within category 3.

¹⁷ One could argue a fourth level here also, namely an experience of the whole "World" as liminal. As an experience this may be said to relate to a religious or philosophical attitudes of world rejection or world suspicion.

¹⁸ In his analysis of Weber and Foucault, Szakolczai (1998) argued that liminality becomes particularly intense when personal and "civilizational" liminality converge, and that this convergence has been present in, and in many ways shaped, the life-works of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, who happened to go through their decisive years of puberty and passage to adulthood during either of the two world wars.

¹⁹ The recognition of the liminal characteristics of modernity was certainly what brought Szakolczai in the "opposite" direction, as for example when he introduced the concept of "home" as central to social and political theory (Szakolczai, 2008b). It does in fact seem that there is no other remedy to permanent liminality than to re-establish some kind of "background" in which individual action can be understood and measured, and in which frenetic movement finds rest. While this may easily come to sound like a conservative call for a "return" to well-

established institutions like church and family in the face of a quickly moving “modern society”, Szokolczai has in several writings drawn attention to certain “technologies of the self”, or to the role played by different ascetic practices orientated towards the transformation of the self, or, following Hadot, toward the practice of a philosophical life.

²⁰ It is not clear to what sources Turner refers, but he may simply have drawn on van Gennep who discusses the Greek material in his chapter on “Initiation Rites”, pp. 88-95, with specific mention of the initiation rites at Eleusis (van Gennep, 1960: 89-91). Turner was often not very precise with his references.

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