

Social Performance

Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics,
and Ritual

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Social dramas, shipwrecks, and cockfights: conflict and complicity in social performance

Isaac Reed

Introduction

Since its post-positivist intersection with culture in the 1960s, sociological theory has taken myriad forms. Longstanding concerns have returned in new form, as a deeper and more detailed understanding of the symbolic has reorganized attempts to theorize social action and social structure. After the structuralist moment, sociological theorists have returned to praxis in its various forms: habitus, structuration, communicative action. The overarching narrative has been: “after the text, practices,” as if by returning to praxis we can return to the real, the political, and the individual.

This move to pragmatics has, often covertly, undercut the attempt to take culture seriously, to analyze the thickness and depth of symbolic structures. Against this tide, the strong program in cultural sociology has continued to emphasize the autonomy of culture and the usefulness of the textual metaphor for understanding it, and remained unwilling to commit to a crude version of the meaning-as-use theorem. Now, however, cultural sociology has turned to the questions of contingency, agency, and creativity; in other words, it has taken up “cultural pragmatics,” thus answering the call to theorize action without reducing meaning.

Part of this project has been the delineation of a general analytic schema of social performance, which, drawing upon theatre studies, analytic philosophy, and dramaturgical sociology, provides a framework for interpreting events in terms of what it takes to make meaning walk and talk. It is a theory of how structure, and in particular, structures of meaning, relate to action, and one whose general analytic outlook is connected to specific research concerns, including the analysis of political scandals and media events, and the development of a broad historical understanding of the differentiation of these elements such that one can explain failed performance and the contingency of audience interpretation in contemporary societies.

However, there are certain questions and concerns that Alexander's general theoretical schema does not address. In particular, there has remained the problem of theatre "proper": to what extent and in what way is "performance" or "dramaturgy" a metaphor for "real action"? From the perspective of a general performance theory, both a performance of *Hamlet* and a public trial have actors and audiences, scripts and a *mise-en-scène*. Yet these performances have quite different consequences and seem to sit inside different contexts of interpretation. Secondly, there is the problem of the conflict of interpretations. That there can be multiple audiences for any performance is an oft-repeated slogan. But how can we begin to differentiate empirically between the different ways audiences can be split? It seems empirically inadequate to say, from the perspective of general performance theory, that both the impeachment of Nixon in front of a nationally televised audience in the United States, something that, it could be argued, achieved almost ritual transcendence (Alexander 1988), and the prosecution of the recent war on Iraq by the United States on the global stage, both exhibited "multiple audiences."

I believe these problems can be addressed within the framework offered by Alexander's theory, through a specification of certain ideal types of social performance. As I mentioned before, the six elements of a social performance make up an analytic theory, in the sense that any performance can be said to contain these elements. However, the ways in which the elements come together, their relationship to each other, remains deliberately unspecified. By specifying the nature of the relations between elements, we can begin to differentiate types of social performance with an eye to empirical research questions. In particular, as will become clear below, I will be interested in the way in which motivated action and its interpretation by audiences vary in the way they relate to the set of collective representations and scripts that are the symbolic background for performance.

My method for the construction of these ideal types is a bit unusual, but I think has a special advantage, given the history and intellectual context of cultural sociology. I want to construct three ideal types of social performance by considering three classic accounts of culture-in-action from symbolic and structural anthropology: Victor Turner on the Henry II–Thomas Becket social drama, Marshall Sahlins on the arrival of Captain Cook to the Hawaiian Islands, and Clifford Geertz on the Balinese Cockfight. By construing a dialogue between the empirical events themselves, the anthropologists' accounts of them, and performance theory in the form of "cultural pragmatics," I hope to accomplish two tasks: to specify the elements of performance theory into identifiable ideal-typical formations that will be useful for further research, and to relativize and systematize these famous anthropological accounts of culture-in-action. The latter purpose requires some words of explication.

The works of Turner, Sahlins, and Geertz on their respective cases are often interpreted as giving, in each case, a paradigmatic account of how culture and action relate, as specifying *the* model by which social researchers can comprehend how societies and their self-symbolizations work. As such, they have all drawn heavy criticism: analytic-theoretical, empirical, and normative. I want to argue, here, that in fact each account specifies a model of one type of cultural action, or performance, which can be seen as manifesting specific and empirically differentiable relations between the six elements of performance theory. As such, they should not be taken as paradigmatic accounts of action and history and their relationship to symbolic formations. This relativization should dampen many of the critiques brought against these various theories, for reasons which should become clear.

Beyond ritual

The use of the concept of ritual to analyze cultural action dates at least as far back as Durkheim's belief/ritual distinction in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Since then, the term has had a quite varied history within anthropology, sociology, and common parlance. For the purposes of this chapter, we can pick this history back up at the moment of Victor Turner's anthropology, and post-Parsonian Durkheimian sociology. It was Turner's insight that social processes that he observed in urbanized Western (and supposedly "secular") societies bore deep affinities with the "ritual process" as he observed it in his fieldwork among small African tribes. He extended this insight in several publications, and in particular he and Richard Schechner engaged with it to better grasp certain forms of theatre that were developing among the American avant-garde. But Turner also developed the concept of social drama to describe more contingent processes of cultural enactment, and he eventually differentiated liminoid activities in modern industrial societies from liminal moments in traditional rites of passage. The concepts of "social drama" and "liminoid" point beyond ritual as the central concept for the analysis of culture-in-action.

Likewise, within the post-Parsonian tradition of sociology, Shils's and Young's (1953) essay on the English coronation is a classic example of an analysis of a ritual in contemporary society that exhibits the nostalgia for more fused societies that Alexander and Mast identify in this tradition of social thought (see Introduction). It is the need to avoid these simplifications of the understanding of the role of the symbolic and the religious in contemporary Western societies, combined with an impetus to increased theoretical sophistication and subtlety, that, I believe, drives Alexander and Mast to give up on "ritual" as a central

analytical concept for the analysis of performance. I agree with this approach, though I do think that, first, it may be possible to specify “ritual” as a type of performance, and that, second, the understanding of ritual as a relatively closed, limited, and determined performance (for better or worse) among sociological theorists may be a (useful) elaboration of a distinction *inherent and specific to Western societies*. That is, the relative unimportance of “ritual” for understanding key processes of differentiation, democratization, and political conflict may be the result of an emic distinction – other modernities may incorporate “ritual” and its strong connection to religion in a way that involves many of the contingencies of performance.

However, this chapter attempts the development of concepts directly tied to the immediate research concerns of the cultural pragmatics group, paramount amongst which are the conflict of interpretations and the role of liminoid culture, neither of which is easily comprehensible from the viewpoint of “ritual” as it has been generally conceived. Rather, I wish to leave ritual, and perhaps some of the cases that it does describe (for example, coronations and inaugurations), as a residual category for the moment, and instead try to advance the framework of performance theory through ideal-type specification of different kinds of social action.

For this purpose, these classic anthropological accounts can do a great deal of theoretical work, if interpreted properly. For they engage the problems of conflict of interpretations, and the role of popular and “fictional” culture in acute and identifiable ways. The Henry–Becket drama exemplifies complicity-in-conflict: all of the actors and audiences, though offering quite conflicting narratives and characterizations, work from within the same deeply felt set of collective representations. The notions of divine kingship, Christian martyrdom, and nascent English nationalism, to name just a few of the meaning configurations that make up the background culture-structure of the drama, are felt by and available to everyone, though who has both the skills and the social power to enact them is of course the key question. The case of Captain Cook exemplifies the opposite extreme, where the cognitive dissonance is so great, the separation of audience interpretations so wide, that one can only claim that the “same” drama was taking place by speaking very literally. And indeed, the (dramatically) ironic “working misunderstanding,” which allowed the show to go on for some time, unraveled with both symbolic and literal violence. Finally, Geertz’s account of the cockfight is, I think, the classic essay showing the deeply metaphorical, rather than merely reflective or functional, role of popular culture in differentiated societies. Though not all culture is “a reading of a reading” or “stories people tell themselves about themselves,” the culture that is such a story – the games people play, the fictions they tell themselves – has deep

and important, and at the same time *indirect*, social effects. How this differs from the more “serious” side of life found in social dramas and shipwrecks is a question I hope to begin to answer by further specifying the nature of this metaphorical relationship.

In what follows, then, I will briefly reconstruct the empirical outlines of each case as presented, respectively, by Turner, Sahlins, and Geertz. I will then consider their explanatory and interpretive efforts from the perspective of performance theory. This will enable me to suggest that while the Henry–Becket social drama, Captain Cook’s shipwreck, and the Balinese Cockfight are all social performances, each, in its respective reconstruction by these anthropologists, signifies a specific type of social performance, whose empirical properties are generalizable in a way useful for further research.

Serious social drama: Henry II and Thomas Becket at Northampton

In his essay, “Religious Paradigms and Political Action” (Turner 1974) Victor Turner is most concerned to show how, when, and why Becket came to attach himself to the “root paradigm” of Christian Martyr, and then to delineate how this scripting of his role in social drama of the Council of Northampton explains the eventual outcome of the larger drama: that is, Becket’s murder six years later. Turner also shows how the adoption of the martyr script takes the form of an initiation, with Henry II as initiator. But Turner’s account is unorganized and confusing, for it is not entirely clear how the social drama model works itself out, nor where it really applies or what it really explains, so caught up is Turner in specifying the moment and nature of Thomas Becket’s individual, psychological transformation (hence Turner’s corresponding tendency to narrate the entire event from Thomas’s point of view). Undoubtedly such an exploration of subjectivity is useful, but I want to adopt here a perspective that is both more analytical and more governed by the trope of dramatic irony, so as to reveal the working out, in the Henry–Becket performance, the specific nature of the ideal type I will call “serious social drama.” In other words, I want to construe a dialogue between Turner’s account and Alexander’s analytic social theory of performance, whereby we might both come up with a clearer explanation of the event itself, and begin to delineate the empirically generalizable features of this type of event.

A stripped-down narrative of the central events in the Henry–Becket social drama might run as follows. Henry appoints his longtime friend and chancellor Thomas Becket to the see of Canterbury, with the probable intent of bringing the Church further under the Crown’s control. Becket strikes a first blow for the Church by resigning his chancellorship, citing conflict of interest.

Becket then proceeds to give up his former ways of sumptuous living, becomes highly religious and ascetic, demands that land that he asserts belongs to the Church be given back by the Crown, and insists that clergy who commit crimes should be tried by ecclesiastical courts. A now hostile Henry attempts to impose his will on Thomas through the counsels of Westminster and Clarendon, and at Clarendon Thomas agrees to many of Henry's demands verbally and thus betrays and angers the bishops. Upon realizing that the Constitution of Clarendon – which gives the power of trial to kings and nobles and makes officers of the King immune to excommunication, as well as stating that clergy cannot leave the country without the King's permission – is to be written down, however, Thomas refuses to sign the roll, and then goes into repentance for his "sin," writing to the pope to confess. The pope condemns ten of the Clarendon clauses. Thomas tries to leave England to confess in person to the pope, but fails. When he tries one last time to reconcile with Henry at Woodstock, Henry dismisses him with reference to his attempts to leave illegally.

At the Council of Northampton, Henry accuses Thomas of breaking the law, the pretense being that John the Marshal was owed some land from the Church, which Thomas had delayed in giving him. Henry arrives late, refuses to greet Thomas with a kiss, and then demands 500 pounds as payment. Thomas retorts ironically, but the bishops act as his guarantors and urge him not to upset the King. Henry continues to demand more and more money from Thomas, for various reasons, until the sum becomes astronomical. Thomas asks to consult with his clergy, thus alienating the barons who favored him. The clergy is divided as to whether Thomas should give in and resign. But after they try to give an initial sum for security and Henry turns it down, it becomes clear that Henry wants to ruin and perhaps imprison Thomas, and that ecclesiastical freedom is at stake. On a Monday, October 12, Thomas falls ill and retreats to St. Andrew's monastery. On Tuesday, October 13, he says the mass of St. Stephen, a martyr whose mass normally comes the day after Christmas, in St. Stephen's church outside of Northampton. Throngs of supportive commoners surround Thomas, who is dressed in his most holy garments, on the way to the church, and then again as he leaves the church to go to court. At court, with Henry upstairs, Thomas communicates his defiance of the King, and the King bullies the bishops into lodging an appeal to the pope against Thomas. The bishops return and pronounce this to Thomas, blaming him for the Clarendon Constitution. Thomas refuses this characterization, and Henry excuses the bishops from further participation. The barons then condemn Thomas as a traitor against the King, and Thomas pronounces that none of them has the right to judge him, and heads for the door, pursued by angry barons. He rides off into the night and into exile, and the rest "is history."

The Henry–Becket social drama might be reconstructed as follows. The primary actors of the drama are Henry, Becket, the barons, and the bishops, the audiences are all of the above, and “the people” (and perhaps “posterity”). There is also the pope, who plays a supporting role and serves as a quite important critical audience. The networks of social power that are important are Henry’s connections to the means of force, by which, if he convinces enough of his barons, he can have Thomas imprisoned, and Thomas’s high office of archbishop of Canturbury – he must at least be heard by the bishops, King, and barons. Furthermore, we have the more general political economy as a background power-struggle between church and state, and, of course the parallel legal systems, both of which have a good amount of legitimacy. It is in the nature of social drama, however, that all of these will be, to a certain extent, put up for grabs during the course of events. When this takes place, both the King and Thomas have good access to means of symbolic performance – Henry has his entourage, his castles, and his literal crown (and his hunting equipment), Thomas has his holy garments and his cross, and access to abbeys and churches.

The collective representations that provide the background meanings in which this drama is immersed include both the specific representations of events between Henry and Becket leading up to this split, and the more general Christian and feudal understandings of sacrality, the divine right of kings, and the infallibility of the pope and the Church, as well as some protonationalist notions of England as realm separate from that of Europe and the world. The specific scripts that will be put into scene are, then, that of a moral king accusing a corrupt churchman, and that of a holy martyr defying a raging tyrant. This conflict of interpretations, within the complicity of a Christian-feudal symbol system, is the key dynamic of cultural action that defines the Henry–Becket case as a serious social drama.

Turner’s explanation of the events, beyond the implicit explanation involved in even the “bare” narrative above, is that the root paradigm of Christian martyrdom provided the narrative mechanism by which a cornered Thomas could win by losing. The key factor explaining the course of events at Northampton is the *mise-en-scène*, in acts and words, of the narrative of the defiant martyr confronting unjust power with holy truth. This is the posited mechanism which parsimoniously explains why (1) Becket defies the King’s personal attacks on him and retreats to consult with his clergy, (2) Becket says St. Stephen’s mass and draws the love and adoration of the crowds, (3) Becket enters the court defiantly carrying his own cross, (4) Henry stays upstairs and avoids confrontation with Becket, (5) Becket defies his own bishops’ pleas and bullying, and (6) Becket interrupts and denies the barons any right to judge him, bringing them to make a violent attack on him. It also, of course, explains (7) why Henry’s

knights murder Thomas six years later, but since Turner does not provide the thick description for that aspect of the long social drama, I will leave it to the side at the moment, and retain merely the flee to exile as the end of the chain of events.

There are three key aspects of the serious social drama performative mechanism. First, Turner demarcates an “existential” aspect of root paradigms that extends beyond the more commonly elucidated aspects of culture structure, the cognitive and moral. This connects Turner’s text to Alexander’s meditations on authenticity as a product of social process – one performs not only the good and the true, but also the real. Furthermore, although we all certainly perform the real everyday, it is in the heightened times of social drama, the “times outside of time,”¹ that the real is not just mundanely reproduced, but at stake and subject to abrupt change. This also explains the raging debates, through the years, about Thomas’s *authenticity* – was he really a dedicated martyr, or a proud man who “did the right deed for the wrong reason” (Turner 1974: 66)?² In serious social drama, for reasons that will become clear, the authenticity of actors is quite often a key issue open for contention – and in a way broader than (though still including) the attribution of subjective intentions.

Second, Turner points out that, despite the usefulness of his “situational” approach, it is not just the immediate actors in this drama that make up the world in which it takes place and which it transforms. For,

Within [the meeting at Northampton] coiled the tensions of the changing structure of Europe, and the form and content of its discourse were drawn from many centuries of literate debate. Although the actors were few, their interactions lend themselves only superficially to small group analysis, for each man there was the representative of many persons, relationships, corporate interests, and institutional aims. (Turner 1974: 71)

Thus the relationship of actions to the larger culture is, in this case, *metonymical*. The notion of metonymy captures the reality effect of serious social dramas, whereby the abstract categories of social good and bad, the general narrative structures of triumph or trauma, are made concrete and particular via walking and talking performers. Metonymical action takes place in an arena of cultural representations shared collectively, and the question becomes who and what is the (authentic) avatar of which trope or truth. When, in *la vie sérieuse*, reality is on the line, we still need concrete actors to actualize the abstract themes of generalized consciousness. When and if their performance succeeds, their specific actions come to be seen as *contiguous* with the general metaphysical categories that define the social field of interpretation (here I am following Jakobson and Halle 1956: 91–6). It is tempting to specify this form of action down to *synecdoche*, the substitution of part for whole or species for genus, but, given the varied nature of social universes of meaning, it’s important to be more flexible.

Metonymical action is that of avatars: Henry represents English nationalism not by virtue of his *likeness* to a nationalist, but because he is its embodiment. A successful performance of metonymical action results in a social interpretation that closes the gap, in interpretive space, between the generalized signifier and its increasingly specified signified. Thus its incredible pragmatic power: the signifier Englishness (or “American presidency,” or “justice”) is presented as if attached directly to a person or thing in the immediate situation, hiding its reliance on a set of abstract, trans-contextual interpretive structures.

The notion of metonymy, and the way in which actors and acts come to embody wider cultural themes and socio-political configurations, brings us directly to the third of Turner’s insights into serious social drama. The contested nature of interpretation takes place, in social dramas, within a more general complicity of opposing actors, interpretive camps, and social fissures. Everyone is arguing using more or less the same set of collective representations. Will Thomas Becket emerge as a true martyr or a corrupt monk? Is Bill Clinton a victim of conspiracy or a profaner of sacred office? It depends on whose interpretation carries the day, but all interpretations take place within a shared discursive field in which all of the social actors are immersed. Turner recognizes this, though he tends to slip towards discussion of it as a complicity between the two central subjectivities of the Henry–Becket drama:

It should be stressed, however, that every sacrifice requires not only a victim – in this case a self-chosen victim – but also a sacrificer. That is, we are always dealing not with solitary individuals but with systems of social relations – we have drama, not merely soliloquy. In the case considered the sacrificer was Henry, who . . . in certain crucial moments almost egged Thomas on to commit himself to the martyr’s path. There is constantly a curious complicity between the two, with Henry daring Thomas to make good his asseverations about the honor of the church. (Turner 1974: 69)

The more opposing actors share the same discursive frameworks and value-orientations, the more intense this complicity-in-conflict is. Clearly, not only a certain English proto-nationalism, a quasi-feudal understanding of kingship and violence, but ultimately (and perhaps to Becket’s advantage and then to his ultimate “triumph”), the framework of Christianity is what defines the complicity in this case, and thus enables the conflict. Specifically, of crucial importance was the trope of the Christian martyr, on the one hand, and of the divine king, on the other. Indeed, in this drama the sacred of the Judeo-Christian was split in two in its empirical manifestation: King Henry – intimidating, loud, jealous, in direct control of the means of violence – came to represent all that inspires fear and awe in the Judeo-Christian sacred. Thomas – sickly, “browbeaten,” and yet steadily defiant – fit the Christian inversion which gives sacred status to the meek and the powerless, who, so deeply connected to the

transcendent sacred of the other world, are not long for this one. That both men found and latched on to these “root paradigms,” and intuitively understood the possible narrative interactions between them, is what Turner brings to the forefront in his explanation.

From this, we can draw some conclusions about the type of serious social dramas more generally, characteristics that will become clearer when compared to the two other types of social performance that follow. The actors in a serious social drama, who are usually important – that is powerful and/or sacred people – stand in for more general themes and issues in the society and culture at large. Furthermore, the audiences, which often include some of the prime actors themselves, can be split as to their interpretations of events, and it is the contestation of interpretations that is the key conflict in this “time outside of time,” when the mundane workings of everyday power and legality are suspended so that they can be existentially thematized. The collective representations are, for all the actors, more or less “the same,” which means that it is the act of specification and embodiment, in the *mise-en-scène*, that is the key site of interpretation. And thus, when the time comes for social drama, actors “cash in” their various political, economic, and social-structural advantages to enable symbolic production and control over interpretation.

Shipwreck in Hawaii

Marshall Sahlins has researched and written extensively on Captain Cook’s arrival, departure, rearrival, and subsequent murder in Hawaii in 1798 (Sahlins 1981, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1995). He is most concerned to explain not only why Cook was killed by the Hawaiians, but more generally, the way in which Hawaiian culture was transformed by the arrival of the British, by way of its reproduction. This enables him to reintegrate history and diachrony into structuralist anthropology, and thus to develop an explanatory paradigm more appropriate to his cultural relativism and his historical interest.

His accounts have produced not only discussion but controversy. In a series of exchanges, he and Gananath Obeyesekere have battled over whether Sahlins is himself caught up in the “European imagination” of Hawaiians (and other colonized peoples) as “savages” (Obeyesekere 1992). I cannot go into the complexities of this debate here. Two comments will have to suffice. First, though Sahlins does focus mostly on the cultural framings of the Hawaiians, and is most concerned to explain the Hawaiians’ action, and thus perhaps at times *assumes* an understanding of why the Europeans act the way they do, at several key points he relativizes the European frameworks of action: their mythological belief in the sacrality of property, their strange Christian understandings of life after death, etc. (Sahlins also might point out ruefully that his focus on the Hawaiian

chiefs' frameworks of action is justified by the fact that they killed Cook, not the other way around). Thus, within the cultural-sociological orientation, which insists on "different cultures, different rationalities," Sahlins does not exhibit European bias. In other words, the Sahlins–Obeyesekere debate can be understood in terms of competing and conflicting paradigms of scientific thought – culturalism vs. pragmatism. Second, the theoretical work I ask Sahlins' account to do for performance theory below – to show the dissonance that results when different orientations to action are brought to the "same" drama – should not be taken as implying an essential and unbridgeable distance between Western societies and their others. Rather, as I will go on to show later, "shipwrecks" can occur anywhere and anytime, and do not represent some essential narrative of history, but rather one of many mechanisms by which it proceeds. Thus the importance of relativizing Sahlins' account: history is not only made through shipwrecks.

A brief narrative of the main events of the Cook case might run as follows. Captain James Cook arrives at the Hawaiian Islands and is greeted as something of a chief/divinity.³ A year later, he returns, appearing off Maui on November 26, 1778, but does not drop anchor and come ashore to Kealahou bay until January 17, 1779, after having circumnavigated the island of Hawaii. There he is greeted with cries of "O Lono!" and escorted by priests to the principal temple, where he is made to imitate the wooden image of Lono, and worshipped with chants, anointed with coconut oil, and fed by hand. This ceremony is repeated on later days in different temples. On January 25, King Kalaniopuu arrives. On February 1 a British seaman dies, and is buried in the great temple by Cook and the Hawaiian priests. Also, on that day, with the permission of the priests, the British carry off the wooden fence and images of the temple, though not the main image of the god Ku, to use for firewood. On February 2 the chiefs begin to ask when the British will be leaving. Cook assures them he will be leaving soon, but promises to come back next year. The British push off.

A few days out, however, one of Cook's ships springs its foremast. The British return to Kealahou bay on February 11. The Hawaiians are unfriendly, in direct contrast to the adoration expressed previously, and start stealing from the British to a degree not seen before. On February 13 an unarmed British party is beaten up. Cook blockades the bay, and heads ashore with marines to take King Kalaniopuu hostage. The King seems ready to let Cook take him aboard until his wife and some other Hawaiians intervene with some words to the King, at which point he sits down and refuses to go on. The Hawaiian crowd surrounding the scene learns that a chief has just been killed trying to leave the bay. Cook fires his gun at a man threatening him with an iron dagger. Nearly a hundred Hawaiians pounce on Cook, and one of them kills him with another iron dagger.

Within forty-eight hours of Cook's death, two priests of the god of Lono sneak out to the British ships (at the risk of reprisal from either the British or the Hawaiians), bringing with them 10 pounds of Cook's hindquarters. Upon presenting it to the British, they ask when he will return. Over the next few days, extensive "negotiations" take place about the possession of Cook's bones. Eventually, on February 20 and 21 the Hawaiian chiefs give up what the British take to be Cook's bones – mostly defleshed and burnt, but with the hands intact. It remains ambiguous as to what they actually were; into the nineteenth century both the British and the Hawaiians claim to possess Cook's remains. Further interactions between the British and Hawaiians take on a different nature than that between Hawaiians and Americans; despite the superiority of American economic influence, in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century many Hawaiian chiefs make political claims on the basis of relationships with the English, and several name their children "King George." Ensuing English travelers are not, however, treated worshipfully as Cook's men were.

In *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981), Sahlins begins his explanation, which generally interweaves the events referred to above in with the ritual and mythological structures that explain them, by detailing the mythico-historical situation in Hawaii at the time Cook arrived. Fundamental was the myth of the arrival of the priest Paa'o, whose relevance is assured by its recurrence in stories that attest to be accounts of contemporary events. In this myth, Paa'o comes over the sea from lands invisible, and installs a new chief as well as a sacrificial cult and image worship. The current (in 1778) King traces his line to Paa'o's chief, Pilikaaiea, who deposed the indigenous chief, Kapawa. Furthermore, the myth of Paa'o contains another usurpation story, encoded in the story of Paa'o's exit from his former island. This is the annual alternation of the gods of war and peace, Ku and Lono. Paa'o avoided the wrath of his brother (who had called up storms) by calling on mackerel and bonito to settle the seas; it is the transition from fishing one to fishing the other that marks the end of the four-month festival of Lono, and the re-emergence of those rituals that are associated with Ku, including sacrifice.

Now, it is important to realize that myth, in Hawaiian society, is directly connected to political intrigue and maneuvering, whereby real chiefs and kings come to real power by really killing other real chiefs and kings. It is this relationship between "religion" and "politics" that cements Sahlins' explanation of the Hawaiians' action, for the relationship between gods and chiefs is one of genus to species – certain chiefs are personifications of gods. Thus gods come to earth in the form of chiefs or wooden idols, and "recur" in various historical situations, the acting out of which is simultaneously the reproduction of the myths and the reproduction of society, neither without significant change. Many other chiefs had been taken as personifications of Lono, and when Cook

was so taken, he was received as such, after he circled the island, encompassing, in space and time, the ritual circling of the wooden idol of Lono around the island that constitutes the Makahiki festival. Cook then left right on schedule, when the time of Lono was over, and that of Ku beginning – whose instantiation was the reigning chief Kalaniopuu. But his return rendered him *hors categorie*, and a direct threat to the King’s power, which was supposed to be reinstalled upon Cook/Lono’s exit. Thus the immediate breakdown of friendly relations between the British and Hawaiians (in particular the King and his chiefs), and the culmination of these hostilities in the murder of Cook.

Furthermore, though the British, in ensuing visits, slowly and surely shed their divine status by eating with women, the Hawaiian mythical structure, via the historical act of sacrificing Cook as an act of usurpation and reclaiming of power by the chief who instantiated Ku, incorporated Britishness into their conception of divinity. As Sahlins puts it, “Mediated by the sacrifice of Cook, the mana of the Hawaiian paramount had become British – hence the role of the British in Hawaiian politics in the decades that followed, despite their supercession in Hawaiian economics” (Sahlins 1981: 26).

But while Sahlins, in his many different accounts of the Cook fiasco, is mainly concerned with explaining the action of the Hawaiians and the ensuing history of those islands, it is clear from several of his accounts that a full explanation of the event at hand relies on the construction of a two-sided model of the “structure of the conjuncture.” For what took place relied, of course, on the action of the British as well, and insofar as each side played certain roles in the other side’s drama, a “working misunderstanding” took place (Sahlins 1982: 81). Thus if Kalaniopuu was the personification of Ku and enacted the myth of the usurpation of chiefly power, Cook was, for the British, the high priest of Imperialism, a mythological structure combining elements of Christianity, the white man’s burden, and bourgeois notions of private property and the pursuit of economic gain. This explains why Cook let himself be received in the way he was, as well as explaining why he refused the women who were offered to him:

Cook in fact was not about to yield to temptations of the flesh, though quite prepared, when there was no danger of introducing “the venereal,” to allow his “people” to so make display of their mortal weaknesses. According to Zimmerman . . . Cook never spoke of religion, would tolerate no priest on his ship, seldom observed the Sabbath . . . It appears there could be only one Authority on board a vessel of His Majesty’s Navy. Hence if Hawaiians really did present their sacred chiefess to Captain Cook because he was a god . . . we can be sure that he refused her – for something like the same reason. (Sahlins 1981: 12)

The ironies of the encounter aside, it is important to see the extent of the working misunderstanding, and thus the two-sided nature of the drama that was

the Cook encounter. On the one side, the Hawaiians receive Cook as Lono, because he arrives, like chiefs-as-personifications-of-gods have done before, from far away. They proceed to act out their own history, including his adoration by priests, his resentment and murder by a “rival” chief, and the ensuing shift in Hawaiian mythical notions of kingship and sacrality. On the other, the British, led by their sacred hero Captain Cook, arrive and interact with the Hawaiians as “savages,” who since they are not Christianized and are superstitious, are likely to make the mistake of treating white men like “gods” (note, of course, that the meaning of this term depends on who is using it and who it refers to: in this case it is the British misunderstanding the nature of Hawaiian religion, and attributing to savages a “nonsense” belief, whereas in fact, within the quite coherent and believable myth-system of Hawaiians, Cook-as-personification-of-Lono makes a good deal of sense). The British interact primarily with economic ends in mind, and thus are happy to be so treated.

The real shipwreck that is the object of understanding here, then, is not the springing of the *Resolution*'s mast or even the murder of Cook, but the cognitive unraveling of the working misunderstanding. The play's the thing, and in this case, one misused prop set the entire drama off course. This is evidenced by the manifest confusions that ensue: the British think the Hawaiians are really crazy when they ask when Cook will be coming back, the Hawaiians are miffed as to why on earth the British want Cook's bones. For “everyone knows” that, on the one hand, there is no reincarnation, and, on the other, that it's the conqueror who keeps the spoils of the slaughter – as well as the mana they represent. The sheer cognitive dissonance here reveals the absorbing power of drama, and proves Sahlins' structuralist point that “*plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change*” (Sahlins 1981: 7)

Importantly, though, it is the cognitive dissonance that really constitutes the shipwreck-as-encounter, that makes this a model of cultural change initiated from the outside. A quick counterfactual will reveal this. If Cook's ship had not sprung its mast, and he was not murdered, would we still have a “shipwreck”? The answer is clearly yes. For Cook's actions had already entered the mythological structure of Hawaiian history, such that Lono's priests had gained in power, and a certain “Britishness” had been lent to certain sacred Hawaiian symbols – the semiotic network had shifted slightly, and contained the seeds for further shifts. We also must imagine that the working misunderstanding still would have unraveled at some point, perhaps with a similar result. Thus the ideal type of the performance of an “encounter” would capture this episode, whether it resulted in this specific murder or not. The specific historical events to be explained could be different, the “structure of the conjuncture” that explains them would be the same.

As we start to relativize this thesis in a comparative way, we can point to three particular features of Sahlins' explanation. The first I alluded to above: the way

in which this history is a history of action based on achieving understanding (on each side) and misunderstanding (between sides). The explanation of action in the case of a shipwreck is achieved mostly by understanding how actors *comprehended* the events that occurred, and comprehended their interactions with and reactions to those events.

Thus while in the case of the serious social drama the authenticity of the actions, and the actors, as they re-enact the mythological structure, is at issue, in a shipwreck the comprehensibility of action and actors is at issue. Thus if social dramatic action is primarily metonymical, then shipwreck action is primarily *categorical*, exemplifying the structuralist model of the cultural categories groping to encompass and define the world, even when it does not quite seem to “fit.” If social dramatic actors act to *make real*, shipwreck actors act to *make sense*. Of course, this does not mean that shipwreck action is “cognitive” in some restricted sense of the word. As Garfinkel (1967) showed long ago, the actions of making sense can be quite morally and emotionally loaded.

Finally, in the case of a working misunderstanding, we have the opposite of the complicity that so exemplified the Becket–Henry case, and can be taken as a central feature of serious social dramas in general. In shipwrecks, there is *conflict without complicity*. And thus they are the ideal case of an *encounter*, wherein a set of social actors are confronted by a set of acts or events in which the intersubjectivity between them and the authors of the acts they confront is minimal. In this case we can speak coherently of the application of cultural categories to an obdurate and obstinate “reality,” or rather, as good structuralists, show that there was never really an option, for if the world is infinite, it only comes to mind within a finite set of categories. The results can, of course, be disastrous.

Cockfighting in Bali: sports as metatheatre

Geertz’s account of the Balinese Cockfight (Geertz 1973a) is not offered as an explanation but as a reading of a reading. He, the ethnographer, is reading the cockfight as a text, one produced by the Balinese as a comment upon themselves and their own existential dilemmas: “The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz 1973a: 452–3). Geertz marches his talent for interpretation of the specific content of other cultures – his ability for thick description – before the reader with such skill that we are inclined to believe him when he claims that “the essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has

said" (Geertz 1973b: 30). The tension here between existential humanism and dialogic anthropology has rearticulated itself in the post-modern challenge to interpretive ethnography, whereby Geertz is taken to task for the false universalizations of Western philosophy that underlie his claims to really know the natives. But Geertz should be read as much more, and much less, than an existential interpreter; the existentialist reading represses the scientific moment in Geertz, where he uses theories to guide his interpretations, and develops models that are generalizable. In particular, in "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," Geertz develops an explanation of the cockfight that can be taken as exemplifying liminoid social performance.

To develop this idea, we have to simultaneously relativize and generalize Geertz's account of the cockfight. It should be taken neither, as many of his critics have taken it, as a paradigm account of culture in action,⁴ nor, as Geertz would sometimes have it, as a "message in a bottle," a small fragment of cultural content, from which one can only draw conclusions about the idiosyncratic ways different cultures solve the same existential quandaries. Rather, noticing the extensive reconstruction of Balinese culture, social structure, and personality structure that precede and accompany Geertz's description of the cockfight (not to mention his extensive work on Bali contained in other essays), the "Deep Play" essay should be seen as developing an interpretive explanation of why the Balinese hold cockfights. This explanation can be reconceived in terms of the theory of performance.

The social behavior of cockfighting in Bali might be briefly described as follows. Balinese men spend a great amount of time grooming, feeding, bathing, and otherwise caring for their cocks, which are the only animals that are treated so well in Balinese society. When the time and space can be arranged, they bring these cocks to cockfights, which take place in a ring approximately fifty feet square. Through a rather ad hoc process, matches are made between two cocks, by their two owners. The cocks have spurs attached to them, and, at the sound of a gong, released in the ring, at which point, they "fly almost immediately at each other in a wing-beating, head-thrusting, leg-kicking explosion of animal fury so pure, so absolute, and in its own way so beautiful, as to be almost abstract, a Platonic concept of hate" (Geertz 1973a: 422). When a wound is inflicted, the round ends, and further rounds continue in this manner until one cock is killed by the other.

Before the fight begins, however, betting within an elaborate and strictly defined system takes place. The center bet, settled quietly between the two parties represented by the two cocks, is usually for a large sum, and is always even money. Between any two men on the side of the ring, however, individual bets can take place, and these are usually for smaller sums, and always takes uneven odds: from 10–9 all the way down to 2–1. These are arrived at by frantic

jostling, yelling, and negotiating, and depend very much on the perception of the evenness of the upcoming fight. The biggest fights are those that are evenly matched and have heavy center bets, and also then high side betting at the 10–9 end of the spectrum. Those considered “true cockfighters” are mainly interested in such “deep” fights, and, since the odds are relatively even, their fortunes do not change much in the long run. Those who are interested in making gain on smaller fights, in gambling for money, and who thus tend to risk losing money as a result, are disparaged as missing the point of cockfighting.

Men who lose deep cockfights become immediately depressed, while those who win become joyous. Furthermore, one is expected to support and bet along family or village lines when cockfights oppose cocks belonging to different groups. And generally, cockfighting serves as a reference point in conversation for the pronouncement of judgment and the production of understanding:

the word for cock . . . is used metaphorically to mean “hero,” “warrior,” “champion,” “man of parts,” “political candidate,” “bachelor,” “dandy,” “lady killer,” or “tough guy.” A pompous man whose behavior presumes above his station is compared to a tailless cock who struts about as if he had a large, spectacular one. A desperate man who makes a last, irrational effort to extricate himself from an impossible situation is likened to a dying cock who makes one final lunge at his tormentor to drag him along to a common destruction. (Geertz 1973a: 418)

Now, Geertz’s explanation of cockfighting can be grasped by considering the cockfight as a social performance. First and foremost, it engages certain key background collective representations, which Geertz reconstructs prior to, and along with, his description of cockfighting. He identifies three central binaries that run through Balinese culture: human/animal, good/evil, and control/loss of control. In particular, notions of animality and uncontrolled behavior tend to line up with socially defined evil behavior:

The Balinese revulsion against any behavior regarded as animal-like can hardly be overstressed. Babies are not allowed to crawl for that reason. Incest, though hardly approved, is a much less horrifying crime than bestiality . . . Most demons are represented – in sculpture, dance, ritual, myth – in some real or fantastic animal form. The main puberty rite consists in filing the child’s teeth so they will not look like animal fangs. Not only defecation but eating is regarded as a disgusting, almost obscene activity, to be conducted hurriedly and privately, because of its association with animality . . . In identifying with his cock, the Balinese man identifying not just with his ideal self, or even his penis, but also, and at the same time, with what he most fears, hates, and ambivalence being what it is, is fascinated by – “The Powers of Darkness”. (Geertz 1973a: 419–20)

Next, the script that condenses some of these meanings is well-defined, it is an inversion inside the ring: “For it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men” (Geertz 1973a: 417). There are specific prescriptions

(stage directions, scripts) to create a deep match, which are or are not met depending on the *mise-en-scène*. As Geertz writes:

THE MORE THE MATCH IS . . .

1. Between near status equals (and/or personal enemies)
2. Between high status individuals

THE DEEPER THE MATCH

THE DEEPER THE MATCH . . .

1. The closer the identification of cock and man (or, more properly, the deeper the match the more the man will advance his best, most closely identified cock).
2. The finer the cocks involved and the more exactly they will be matched.
3. The greater the emotion that will be involved and the more the general absorption in the match.
4. The higher the individual bets center and outside, the shorter the outside bet odds will tend to be, and the more betting there will be overall.
5. The less an "economic" and the more a "status" view of gambling will be involved, the "solider" the citizens who will be gaming. (Geertz 1973a: 441)

The social power involved is made clear by this script: high status men are the ones who control and lead this activity, and who bring weight and meaning to it. Furthermore, the status system, as known by everyone, is taken for granted as a condition of play, and to this degree sits as a collective representation also enacted by cockfighting.

When the fights take place, the *mise-en-scène* is a hectic combination of gestures and shouts for betting, careful caretaking and preparation of the cocks by the men they will represent, and rulings and time-keeping by the umpire. Thus the actors are the cocks, the men they represent, and the umpires, playing to an active, participatory audience that crowds around the stage. Geertz characterizes the cockfight as one of Goffman's "focused gatherings" which, "take their form from the situation that evokes them, the floor on which they are placed, as Goffman puts it; but it is a form, and an articulate one, nonetheless. For the situation, the floor is itself created . . . by the cultural presuppositions which not only specify the focus but, assembling actors and arranging scenery, bring it actually into being" (Geertz 1973a: 424).

Thus cockfighting can be analyzed in the terms of Alexander's performance theory. But our explanation as such is incomplete, for we need to account for the role of cockfighting in Balinese society, and specify what it is, in particular, that makes this type of performance different from serious social drama (remember, in a cockfight "no one's status really changes" (Geertz 1973a: 443)) and from encounters with other cultural formations. For the cockfight is full of complicity, but does not act out Balinese socio-historical reality in the same direct way as,

say, the Council of Northampton redirected the course of the Church's role in England. Rather, the cockfight, as a liminoid activity,⁵ relates *metaphorically* to Balinese society.

These performances in the liminoid sphere are *metatheatre*, by which I mean to indicate that while all action is citational in that it references scripts and background sets of collective representations, action in the liminoid sphere, which has its own set of signifier–signified relations, or semiotic practices (within the sphere of, say, cockfighting), also makes a second reference, more hidden but no less deep, to the general troubling questions and problems of action in real life. Metatheatre presents imaginary solutions to real problems.⁶ When a “deep” fight is achieved, the flow that takes place as a result of a successful cockfight, while merging signified and signifier within the liminoid sphere, continues to have a separate referent outside of the fight itself – certain themes and tensions in Balinese culture. This is the key insight of Geertz about cockfighting: that it is “a story they tell themselves about themselves” (1973a: 448). But this needs to be taken as a meditation on the role of popular culture in differentiated societies, not an analytic definition of all cultural action.

The cockfight achieves this by a resignification process, whereby a system of economic rationality (the betting) becomes the means to a different, meaningful end, the acting out of a story about the Balinese social order:

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status distinctions (such reinforcement is hardly necessary in a society where every act proclaims them), but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves. (Geertz 1973a: 448)

I think this understanding of the cockfight as social performance can give us a more cultural, meaning-centered, vision of the “relatively autonomous fields” that Bourdieu is so concerned with. Indeed art – and for that matter, football – has its own set of rules. But performing within these constraints, fleshing out these scripts (defensive strategy to contain an “explosive” football offense, how to dunk a basketball) simultaneously refer to other spheres of meaning that sit at the center of *la vie sérieuse* (war and victory culture, codes of honor and cool in the ghetto). In essence, the work of sublimation is a complex cultural and social interaction that is not so much a rechanneling of drives as a repetitive, active, working out of meaning structures in a realm protected from the exigencies of politics and economics, so that the very culture structures upon which those

activities depend in part for their constitution can be realized as pure aesthetic form.

Now, of course, theatre, sports, and all the rest of our liminoid activities are of course also social practices in their own right, and as such also respond to the exigencies of power and money, but I insist that there is something to the common reference to these things as “culture” in everyday parlance. This obviously is an enormous issue for social science, one which I cannot hope to adequately address here. But I think that understanding the cockfight as a certain type of social performance – as liminoid metatheatre – can help us begin to specify the indirect, metaphorical, and incredibly powerful role of popular culture in constituting the collective representations in a given society.

The fundamental aspects of this type of performance have been laid out in the course of my discussion of Geertz’s essay, but it will be useful to summarize them here. Liminoid metatheatre is, first of all, *play*; it is separated from *la vie sérieuse*, and therefore its influence on the social system and the culture that frames it is indirect. Secondly, liminoid action is fundamentally metaphorical in relation to the larger society. The cockfight is *like* status competition, football is *like* war and combat. Thus if metonymical action *makes real*, categorical action *makes sense*, metaphorical action *rereads* and *re-presents*.

In this light, we can see why the standard sociological critiques of Geertz’s essay miss the point. Instead of arguing over whether Geertz excludes the exigencies of real life, real power, and real actors’ solutions to real problems, we should insist that life is not only a football game, and, if we want to critique Geertz’s essay for missing some aspect of Balinese society, we can only ask Geertz to explain why it was not thematized *in this instance of metatheatre*, and in what instance of popular culture it *is* thematized.

Conclusion: notes for further research

Having specified, and summarized, the essential features of these types of social performance, I would like to offer here some brief reflections on their significance for the research paradigm of cultural sociology which is advancing through the construction of a “cultural pragmatics.”

First, as I adumbrated earlier, the focus on social drama within cultural sociology, and the corresponding move away from ritual, has significance along many dimensions of social theory, including the normative. While sociological engagement with and critique of democratic theory, and in particular the theories of Jürgen Habermas, has taken many turns and directions, the cultural-sociological line has most often been to emphasize the content-specific nature of democratic culture. Formal mechanisms of publicness, cultural sociologists argue, are not enough, one needs the “discourse of civil society,” understood

in terms of binary codes of rational/irrational, and romantic and ironic narratives, to enable the thematization of lifeworld issues in the public sphere in a democratic way. In this context, the move from ritual to social drama is important because it places positive value on conflict and contention in interpretation. Against earlier Durkheimians, cultural sociologists minimize the normative importance of ritual in constituting a democratic society; in fact, we have become increasingly suspicious of the way in which ritual, by assuming understanding *and* agreement, can risk the exclusion of alternative voices and ethical concerns (Mouffe 2000).

Second, as debates about culture and politics heat up the public sphere, the issue of cultural “shipwrecks,” which have long been a key subject for post-colonial studies, communitarian political theory, and postmodern anthropology, becomes increasingly urgent. Jeffrey Alexander’s chapter on the different interpretations given to the events of September 11, 2001 attempts to gain sociological traction without enacting the reification that is characteristic of Huntington-inspired accounts of “civilizations” and is so normatively problematic. The model offered here of shipwrecks is specifically intended to be generalizable beyond clashes between the “West” and its others. Though it is *not* an analytic theory, the ideal type of “shipwreck” reoccurs, I suspect, across the board and from macro to micro (think again of Garfinkel’s breaching experiments).

Finally, much needs to be done, empirico-analytically and normatively, to account for the metaphorical and indirect role of popular culture, and in particular, in the contemporary West, of those quasi-religious experiences of collective effervescence: watching sports live, and going to the movies. If the late Durkheim lives, it is on the silver screen, and in college basketball arenas. I am unconvinced that such social texts, or their collective experiencing, can be reduced to either “hegemony” or “resistance.” Rather, their extensive spirals of signification constitute a performative field whose empirical effects have yet to be specified.

Notes

1. See Alexander’s analysis of the Watergate crisis, which, while still operating within the ritual framework, articulates well the meaning of Turner’s apt phrase (Alexander 1988).
2. Turner is referencing T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935).
3. Here it becomes especially clear how even the most bare narratives are “interpretations” and thus raise theoretical and epistemological issues, not to mention political hackles. For the purposes of the ideal types to be constructed here, however, I am

taking this “fact” as part of a first-order interpretation, to be accounted for by the second-order interpretation of Hawaiian mythology.

4. Cf. Ann Swidler (2001), *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), and Michael Burawoy (1991), “Reconstructing Social Theories,” pp. 8–28 in Michael Burawoy et al., *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
5. Cf. Victor Turner (1982) *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (Performing Arts Journal Publications). Turner adopts the term “liminoid” to describe the leisure activities that, in “industrial societies,” have, from his perspective, similarities to the “liminal” qualities of the ritual process as he observed it in small-scale African societies. I use the term loosely the same way here, though I do not accept the sharp distinction between industrial and pre-industrial societies. Rather, any society with a sufficient amount of differentiation such that it can self-define some of its activities as “play” or “theatre” or “sport,” can have “liminoid metatheatre.”
6. Though the phrase comes from George Lipsitz, the reference is to Lévi-Strauss’ account of the Oedipus story in “The Structural Study of Myth”: “The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous . . . to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman . . . Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity in structure. Hence cosmology is true” (Lévi-Strauss 2002: 216).

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