

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony
Lecture 2: Defining Ritual 2

* Today we will continue our definitional strategy by reviewing:

- (1) 5 inadequate conceptions of ritual;
- (2) 4 only partly adequate conceptions; and
- (3) some special problems in the study of ritual.

Five Inadequate Conceptions:

(1) Habit and Routine:

- undermines the social importance, meaningfulness and efficacy of ritual
- habits lack what energizes rituals: symbolically effecting the serious life

(2) Insincere Public Performance: Calling these rituals:

- undermines ability to distinguish rituals from insincere public performances
- such a presumption becomes a habit relegating ritual to something unworthy of respect or attention (“mere ritual”)
- potentially reflects a mind-set that could undermine social order

(3) Empty Convention: “Going through the motions”

- treats the pathological as the normal
- the ability to understand rituals that work is lost (e.g. politeness)

(4) Stylistic, Symbolic or Aesthetic Excess:

- sees everything beyond the instrumental as superfluous
- fails to identify the ritual element of social actions that are not

aesthetically excessive

- isolates ritual and labels it excessive, hence unnecessary
- sets up unfortunate dichotomies that removes ritual from the world of the practical, real, or simple and implicitly denigrates it as impractical, unreal, irrational and overwrought

(5) Ritual=Myth=Ideology=Lying or Confusion:

- sees ritual as the promulgation of a myth or propaganda in service of the powerful
- not always the case: treats hypotheses as conclusions, placing both before facts due to unexamined value judgements
- every social order has a symbolic means of maintenance and adaptation, yet critiques must be substantive
- people are not necessarily confused by ritual
- this conception constrains ritual to the world of the unreal or distrusted: cannot deal with the variety of rituals or their results

Four Only Partly Adequate Conceptions:

(1) Ethological: Ethologists see rituals as conspicuous, patterned behavior with a signalling function. Rituals are displays linked to normally motivated behaviors

- important lessons may be drawn in careful mapping of behaviors, at which ethologists are highly skilled
- yet there are important differences between human society and animal biology, between the human and biological sciences (e.g. culture and meaning vs. simply releasing instinct)
- ritual is not repetitive behavior characteristic of the whole species, but of individual members of a particular culture
- ritual focuses on more than the future, it considers the meaningful past, tradition, the mysterious, the mythic outside the current, unfolding social situation
- rituals have as much to do with ideas as they do behavior

(2) Freudian: Freud viewed ritual as akin to obsessive behavior and religion to neurosis

- without symptomology degenerates into ritual as habit (we have already rejected)
- symptomology puts ritual under a dark cloud of pathology/ analysts unable to understand the meaningfulness of positive rituals that don't fit the mold
- some useful contributions: ritual signifies something not otherwise physically present. Ritual behavior is a sign of something else deeper and more numinous for participants

(3) Sentiment and Solidarity: Durkheim argued ritual functions to maintain the social order by way of sentiment and solidarity

- overemphasizing this part of his theory is too simplistic: overemphasizing the maintenance of a specific order and oversimplifying the mechanisms for doing so
- yet attending to Durkheim's cognitive element enables us to consider the role of ritual in enabling division and argument

(4) Maintenance of the Status Quo: Rituals do not always function to maintain the social order

- the role of ritually-connected ideals: serve as evaluation standards and reminders of what is preferred. Can challenge the status quo
- rituals are also open to interpretation and can be used to mask opposition or create a space for freethinking that may support the emergence of resistance, conflict or change
- social conflict is also ritually structured in 2 ways: (1) the ritual expression of recurrent conflicts; and (2) in more episodic and anti-institutional events like sit-ins, protest marches, chanting, etc: ritual construction of an order of protest

Special Problems in the Study of Ritual:

(1) Social Change: Explanation of social change is a recognized

problem for the student of ritual

- rituals are seen as traditional/slow to change
- structural anthropology emphasized a presumably stable social order, more or less up to the work of Leach in the 50's
- today there is more emphasis on changes in ritual procedures and links between rituals and larger social changes:

(1) Anthropological literature on culture contact and diffusion of cultural forms;

(2) Literature on historical changes in ritual and attendant institutional changes;

(3) Revolutions accompanied by efforts to overthrow rituals of the old regime and establish new, more appropriate ones; and

(4) research showing that as interpersonal and family relationships change, so do ritual forms of the relation.

At bottom:

- ritual and social order are not the same, but analytically distinct
- their relationship is so tight the relationship is often confused
- ritual is a means of conducting the social order

(2) Inventing Rituals:

- rituals do not spring from nowhere: they must evolve or be invented - though rarely are the invention of an individual author
- their origins are usually diffused across people, places, times, and interests. If a single author, the context must still be examined
- invented rituals and formal institutions are clearly associated
- more mundane rituals and traditions emerge or are invented
- invented rituals must resonate with their intended audiences