

7 Victor Turner

Liminal Experiences as the Grounding of Social Theory

Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them . . .

Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between', in *The Forest of Symbols*, 1967

In Chapter 4 we attempted a reassessment of the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, an exercise of particular importance for the grounding of two key terms, participation and experience. In this chapter we will continue the anthropological exploration of the nature of experience via the work of Victor Turner and his elaboration of Arnold van Gennep's terminology of ritual passages. This chapter therefore engages an Archimedean point of this book, namely the parallels between Dilthey's attempt to reconceptualise experience as *Erlebnis*, in contradistinction to the Kantian *Erfahrung*, and Victor Turner's development of van Gennep's idea about the liminal aspects of rites of passage. Although these parallels were recognised by Turner in the last years of his life, he never worked out their full implications. We argue that this encounter between the works of Dilthey and Turner was among the most significant events in the social thought of the past decades, which so far did not receive proper attention for a number of reasons – not least because Turner died soon after his reading of the works of Dilthey; and because of the general problems of Dilthey's work, magnified by a rather unfortunate reception history.¹ The encounter between Turner and Dilthey will be situated into the context of Turner's previous encounter with the work of van Gennep, that happened in the mid-1960s in a particularly liminal setting. The chapter will also include a third 'encounter' that again allows us to return to some unresolved questions opened up in Chapter 4, namely the late encounter between Colin Turnbull and Victor Turner, leading to Turnbull's important notion of 'total participation'.

¹ For a first elaboration of this point, see the section entitled 'Victor Turner Encountering Wilhelm Dilthey' in Szakolczai (2004: 69–72). This article was based on a paper given at the 94th conference of the ASA (6–10 August 1999, Chicago), entitled 'The Experiential Bases of Social Thought'.

Into the Life-Work of Victor Turner

Victor Turner (1920–83) is one of the most fascinating and important anthropologists of the twentieth century. He always had an acute perception of the importance of threshold experiences. Turner was born in Scotland; his father was an electronics engineer who worked on the invention of TV, while his mother was a theatrical actress. From his mother Turner inherited a profound interest in the theatrical and creative side of life. Turner had a lifelong interest not only in ritual, but also in art, literature, in particular the Greek and Latin classics, and poetry (which he also wrote). At the age of 11 he was suddenly forced to leave as he went with his divorced mother to live with his maternal grandparents in Bournemouth, England, and was raised by them, with his grandfather dying in 1935.²

Turner later studied English language and literature at University College London (1938–41). During the war he spent some time in a public library and had a formative reading experience when he encountered Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Mead's famous book describes the culture-specific ways in which children of either sex turn into adults. Turner decided to study anthropology at University College of London. Here he attended lectures by some of Britain's best anthropologists, including Daryll Forde, Meyer Fortes and Raymond Firth, the 'three F-s' (Manning 1984: 195), but also Radcliffe-Brown, the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe and Edmund Leach. He received his BA with honours in 1949. Max Gluckman, the leading member of the Manchester School, then offered Turner a grant from the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute to carry out fieldwork in an African tribe. Turner accepted and was assigned to the Mambwe tribe. In the event, he never reached the Mambwe homeland. During his stay at the Institute in Lusaka he received a telegram from Gluckman: "Suggest you change to Ndembu tribe Northwestern Province much malaria yellow fever plenty of ritual" (as in E. Turner 1985: 2). In 1950, together with his wife Edith, with whom he raised five children (a sixth died in infancy in 1960), Turner moved to the Mukanza village in the Mwinilunga district of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). Here Turner started his fieldwork among the Ndembu. Plenty of ritual indeed! Edith Turner was always with him, helping him greatly with both data-gathering and interpretation. Having three young children around also greatly helped, far from hindering, *proper* fieldwork – for which their university education had not really prepared them (Engelke 2008: 277–9).

² See E. Turner (1984, 1985). We are extremely grateful to Edith Turner for sending Arpad Szakolczai a whole dossier of photocopied materials, many of which were unpublished typescripts. With her unique gracefulness she most kindly allowed him to use this material, and we very much hope to live up to her gesture. She also informed him that Victor Turner never did interviews. For important autobiographical material, see also Victor Turner's 'Introduction' to *From Ritual to Theatre*.

Recollections of Victor Turner, most of them made very shortly after his passing away, offer us two key summary characterisations of Turner as a person – both of which are crucial for understanding his contributions but also their limits. The first captures his true geniality: he was a spellbinding character, ‘[o]verflowing with ideas’ (Seneviratne 1984: 3), whose ‘understanding of developments in widely divergent scholarly disciplines was nothing less than prodigious’ (McClaren 1984), his work being ‘a remarkable intellectual odyssey’ (Wagner 1984), having an ‘infectious ability to relate scholarship to life’ (Manning 1984: 198). In meeting him for the first time around 1950, when Turner was on his way to Zambia, Hilda Kuper (1984) recalls him giving ‘a particular impression of intensity’, something like a ‘glow’, as he ‘radiated beauty and vitality’; while for Willis (1984: 75) to be in his ‘presence was an unforgettable experience, for in him there was, most unusually, no apparent division between life and work’. Turner did not betray such talents and promises, as he went ahead to change the course of anthropology, in a way that was comparable to Mary Douglas (Wagner 1984). In spring 1998 Beth Barrie gave a course on Turner in Indiana University, testing the idea whether ‘individuals can shape disciplines’.³

Yet, and strangely enough, given that he was both an exceptional family man and devoted teacher, having a particularly full social life, Turner, not unlike Radin, also had a character streak recalling the trickster – as perhaps indeed this is all but a precondition of intellectual prowess. Thus, he was characterised, and by persons closest to him, as a liminal character himself, who ‘played the role of *magister ludi* on many a social occasion’, having a desire to run a samba school in Rio (Manning 1984: 198); even an “academic fool” (Ronald Grimes, as in McClaren 1984), which is a very multifaceted claim, and can even incorporate some responsibility for the fact that his work is not ‘receiving his intellectual due’ (Handelman 1993). Such a characterisation, not surprisingly, reaches its true depth in a memorial by his wife and eldest son (E. Turner and F. Turner n.d.). According to their account his originality was uncomfortable not only to others, but first of all to himself: he ‘didn’t believe he had a real being of his own’ (2); ‘he believed in the immortality of other peoples’ souls, but not his own’, having a strong fear of death (2–3); even his antics, jokes, dancing and parties were not simply expressions of a natural sociability, but rather ‘his attempt to create a communion which, because of his alienness . . . he could not fully share’ (3).⁴ All this is demonstrated particularly well through his

³ Beth Barrie, E500, ‘Victor Turner’, www.log24.com/log07/saved/070508-Turner.html (accessed 5 November 2002).

⁴ We cite these passages in full respect for the intellectual achievements of Victor Turner and his integrity of character, in the name of the truth, and also as an illustration of the extreme complexity of the ‘trickster’ figure, especially in – though by no means restricted to – the modern world.

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three most important personal myths: Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, even learned to fly and had to look at his home from the outside, staring at his parents inside who forgot him; Dürer's etching 'The Knight, Death and Devil', with Death being always at the back of the Knight;⁵ and the unicorn of Rilke – to which on the same page, as a special fourth, Faust is added (3). Thus, in spite of his relentless pursuit of his work, and his evident successes, he felt that 'he had missed his true calling', which was poetry (5); and that, in spite of his genuine piety, 'devotion to the Virgin Mary' (2) and love of order and culture, he 'loved even more the chaotic forces which subvert and overthrow' such forms, 'feel[ing] intuitively that chaos was fertile, productive, and creative' (5). Perhaps this aspect contributed to his 'neglect of the complementary destructive and terrifying aspect of liminality' (Willis 1984: 75), and thus, eventually, to the 'indulgent application of facile renditions' of his key ideas (Handelman 1993: 122).⁶ We shall return to these points below.

Turner's Encounter with Arnold van Gennep: From 'Social Dramas' to Liminality

Turner was trained in Marx-inspired conflict theory and Durkheim-inspired functionalist anthropology, and his early work largely stayed within these traditions, analysing schism and conflict as part of the social structure.⁷ The first result of Turner's research among the Ndembu was his doctoral dissertation, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life* (Turner 1957a). In this work, Turner analysed the mechanisms of resolving social conflicts in Ndembu society. Turner devoted only one of twelve chapters to the study of ritual, and it was indicatively entitled 'The Politically Integrative Function of Ritual'. At this stage of his life, Turner saw rituals as redressive mechanisms for the tensions produced in the secular order.

Turner's departure from this functionalist paradigm happened in steps. The first such step was his introduction of the term 'social drama'. Turner sensed that much of social life was clearly theatrical. The social dramas among the Ndembu, Turner said, exhibit a *processual* form, following a pattern of four phases: (1) a breach of regular norm-governed social relationships between persons or groups of a social unit; (2) a crisis or extension of the breach, unless

⁵ A whole series of major figures of European culture, including Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Wagner, Max Weber and Thomas Mann were also thoroughly enchanted by this image.

⁶ For a similar problematisation of the Turner reception, see St John (2008: 15–18); a volume prepared for commemorating the 25th anniversary of Turner's passing away.

⁷ This and the following section draws on chapter 3, 'Liminality Rediscovered: With Victor Turner and Beyond', in Thomassen (2014: 71–88), as well as on Szokolczai (2004, 2008, using the original version written in English).

the conflict can be sealed off quickly; (3) adjustive and redressive mechanisms brought into operation by leading members of the social group; and (4) reintegration of the disturbed social group or social recognition of an irreparable breach or schism (Turner 1957a: 91–4). At this stage, Turner did not reject functionalism. However, as Edith Turner would claim in the Prologue to *Blazing the Trail* (1992: xii–iii), he always suspected that there was something anomalous in Durkheim’s idea of a ‘social fact’.

Turner’s work took a new direction in 1957, the same year as his thesis was published (and incidentally the year that van Gennep died). The notion of ‘social drama’ had already opened the door for another way of approaching social life. Among the Ndembu rituals were omnipresent, and social life largely organised around a variety of such rituals. In her memory of their fieldwork experiences, Edith Turner (1985: 2–3) tells how the beating of the ritual drums could be heard so often that she and Victor were simply forced by circumstance to rethink the social role of rituals. Almost in the secret,⁸ and against the explicit recommendations of Max Gluckman (who ordered Turner to cover every aspect of ‘social structure’ before engaging with the ritual ‘superstructure’), Turner slowly came to consider ritual the core of his interest (for further details, see Deflem’s excellent account of Turner’s intellectual development, 1991).

Still in 1957 Turner also wrote his first essay on ritual proper (Turner 1957b), circulated only among a smaller group of friends. Here Turner started to mark his difference from the conflict theory framework of the Manchester School. In the years that followed, Turner went through a decisive reorientation that can be tightly compared to the type of change undergone by Marcel Mauss during World War I. Turner was trained into the mainstream British structural-functionalist anthropology, and after World War II, much under the influence of Max Gluckman, he developed a Marxist orientation and even became a member of the Communist Party. By 1956–7 both these orientations became increasingly untenable for him, both on the back of his experiences among the Ndembu and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in November 1956. In 1957 Turner resigned from the British Communist Party and renounced Marxism. Later that year Turner was received into the Roman Catholic Church while his relations with Max Gluckman became

⁸ As argued also in Deflem’s reconstruction, Turner’s hesitation with regard to immersing himself fully in the Ndembu ritual complex was surely related to his position within the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute of Sociological Research (Kuper 1983: 128–9, 150–53; Deflem 1991). Studies of ritual had a very low priority at the Institute, which focussed on political and legal systems, urbanisation, labour migration and social and economic organisation. The Institute produced studies with a high degree of (neo-Marxist) uniformity whereby ‘deviants and turn-coats were treated with great ferocity internally, but no criticism was tolerated from outsiders’ (Kuper 1983: 129).

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increasingly strained.⁹ It was around that time that Turner became recognised as a ‘creative maverick’ and ‘iconoclast’ (McClaren 1984), someone who ‘had the courage to follow his intellectual convictions wherever they might lead’ (Wagner 1984: 1); an outsider by choice who ‘chose to dwell apart from the centre of British social anthropology’, in a manner comparable to a ‘renouncer-saint of the forest’, even though not in complete isolation (Seneviratne 1984: 3)¹⁰; who had the ‘uncomfortable presence of true originality’, thus not needing the revisionist touch of ‘humanizing’ often characterising personal memoirs (E. Turner and F. Turner n.d.: 1–2).

During his years as Simon Research Fellow, lecturer and senior lecturer at Victoria University of Manchester (1957 to 1963), Turner started to devote his time almost entirely to writings on Ndembu ritual. It was not going to go down well with his surroundings.¹¹ In 1963 Turner was offered a professorship of anthropology at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He had previously been appointed a fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, California (1961–2). He accepted the offer and decided to move to America. British academia had become a straightjacket to Turner, and the experimental tendencies in American science would attract him much more. The parallels to Gregory Bateson, discussed in Chapter 6, and emphasised among others by McLaren (1984) as a direct influence on Turner, are more than obvious (and in fact, Bateson had left quite a legacy at Palo Alto, where Turner must have heard of him).

1963: Turner Encounters Arnold van Gennep

With the reorientation towards process and ritual, moving outside Durkheimian functionalism and neo-Marxism, Turner seemed destined to encounter the work of Arnold van Gennep, but the precise manner in which it happened still merits our attention. During his fieldwork, Turner had read about van Gennep via the work of Henri Junod (Turner 1985c: 159), so an indirect connection had been made. Turner stumbled upon van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage* almost by chance during the summer of 1963, at a moment when Turner found himself in a quintessential in-between situation. Turner had already resigned from Manchester and had sold his house, but he was still waiting for his US visa, which was continuously delayed because of his refusal to serve in the armed military during World War II. The Turners were staying at Hastings on the English Channel, living in ‘a state of suspense’ (E. Turner 1985: 7). Turner

⁹ See Kuper (1984), Wagner (1984) and Willis (1984).

¹⁰ The centrality of the renouncer-saint for late Renaissance art was underlined by Enrico Castelli (1900–1977) in his masterly book *The Demonic in Art*.

¹¹ Hilda Kuper’s 26 June 1984 letter is quite revealing in this context, as she states that Turner looked distinctly less happy with Gluckman than in 1950.

literally lived at a spatio-temporal threshold when he encountered van Gennep. In contrast to Lévi-Strauss and his British followers, Turner *experientially* recognised the importance of van Gennep's insight. The reading inspired him, on the spot, sitting at a small desk in the library at Hastings, to write the breakthrough essay 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage', the famous chapter in his 1967 book, *The Forest of Symbols*. Turner presented the paper once in America, in March 1964, when he had finally taken up his position at Cornell. The reading of van Gennep's book became a touchstone for everything Turner did, said and thought after 1963. It was an authentic 'reading experience'.¹²

It was one of Turner's many merits to 'liberate' van Gennep's framework from both the functionalist and structuralist straight-jackets. The reading conducted Turner towards his lifelong exploration of the liminal. In his analyses of Ndembu ritual, Turner (1967, 1969, 1975) showed how ritual passages served as moments of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up, and argued, against Durkheim (and therefore also against Radcliffe-Brown), that rituals were much more than mere elaborations of 'social structure'. Van Gennep's framework and the concept of liminality therefore complemented the notion of 'social drama' already introduced by Turner.

*Liminality and Ritual Passages among the Ndembu:
The Development of Turner's Approach*

As suggested by van Gennep himself, Turner recognised that van Gennep's scheme was inherent in the ritual structure itself. It was thus not a theoretical construct, in the manner of neo-Kantian 'concept formation', but rather close to the participatory experience of Lévy-Bruhl. All the Ndembu rituals Turner had observed were indeed characterised by the three-phased processual form of rites of passage and conveyed as such in Ndembu language (Turner 1967: 13–14).

The religious component in ritual was now essential for Turner. In his work on the Chihamba ritual, for instance, Turner refused to explain away the religious aspect in ritual: 'One has to consider religious phenomena in terms of religious ideas and doctrines' (Turner 1975: 195), almost turning on its head Durkheim's dictum that social phenomena need social explanation. In a deeply reflexive vein, Turner (1975: 31–2) could therefore conclude: 'After many years as an agnostic and monistic materialist I learned from the Ndembu that ritual and its symbolism are not merely epiphenomena or disguises of deeper social and psychological processes,

¹² For this idea, central for understanding the formation of key authors, see Szokolczai (1998: 28–30).

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but have ontological value'. This also implied a necessary attention paid to actual religious *experience*. For Turner ritual is religious, and religion involves both social experiences in concrete ritualistic activity and a systematic corpus of beliefs 'which have for their object invisible and intangible beings or powers which a human group recognises as superior, on which it depends' (Turner and Turner 1982: 201).

The Later Victor Turner

In Turner's later works (1982, 1985, 1988) a series of further developments took place. Turner slowly became more and more interested in the comparative dimensions of his approach. His focus remained on 'social dramas' and liminal experience, but during the 1970s his fields of reference extended to include literature, film, images and various forms of spectacle. In New York Turner came into contact with theatre and performance groups. This interaction led to a Turner-inspired school of performance studies, still today represented by one of Turner's associates there, Richard Schechner. Emblematically, Edith Turner's Prologue to *Edge of the Bush*, the first volume of his collected essays, was subtitled 'From the Ndembu to Broadway'. The Turners also went to Brazil, observing carnival and the Brazilian Umbanda ritual, which, as Turner noted, shared many parallels with Ndembu ritual. Finally, Turner took an interest in pilgrimage, again based on a participatory experience with his wife, Edith. Pilgrimage had in fact been singled out by Arnold van Gennep as a particular form of ritual passage, and with specific reference to Catholic pilgrims (van Gennep 1960: 184–5).

Beyond Turner: Liminality in Modernity

In his ethnographic accounts, Turner repeatedly identified parallels between 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 towards the end of his life; and yet, it is precisely this part of Turner's work that is in need of analytical elaboration in order to evidence its relevance for social theory.

Turner had seen how decisive ritual passages and liminal experiences were for the Ndembu; and quite clearly, the same seemed to hold true among practically any 'non-modern' society. Ritual passages and liminal experiences gave form and rhythm to social groups, and also formed and shaped individual personalities, in ways that were certainly 'structured' but at the same time never perfectly predetermined. Turner came to see liminality as the key to culture.

The question was this: what happened to liminality within a horizon of the modern?

In a famous article, 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology' (1982), 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. In art and leisure, Turner argued, we recreate 'life in the conditional' and thus revive the playful. Turner's notion of the liminoid has had a huge influence on literature, performance and theatre studies and made Turner known in wider circles.

However, Turner's understanding of the liminal as relating in modern society primarily to art and leisure easily neglects some of the clearly dangerous or problematic aspects of liminality. To have a reading experience, to go to the theatre or to enjoy a holiday are all very good. But such experiences share very little of that *danger* and real peril involved in entering a liminal phase. Liminality involves a destruction of previous norms, but in ritual passages such destruction and a sudden void in values and social positions is tied together with a re-formation of values and norms that are made public during the reintegration rituals; without such balancing acts of reconstruction and redress, liminality becomes pure danger. Turner's ideas first started to spread around the late 1960s in America, a period so heavily marked by a taste for transgression and a break with everything 'traditional'. Turner's ideas found fertile terrain with the postmodernist turn of the 1980s. Turner became a celebrated reference point in the 1980s and 1990s, as anthropology – and later sociology; see Alexander, Giesen and Mast (2006) – went through a 'performative turn' with a focus on process. 'Process' and 'performance' were always crucial terms to Turner. Here again the dangerous, troubling, anxiety-generating aspects of uncertain periods of transition, conflict and crisis were simply ignored.

Turner did also seem to take a celebratory stance towards the kind of *communitas* that emerges in liminality, forgetting again how the instigation of sentiments among groups of people thrown into the same crisis situation might easily propel out of control, leading to pure destruction. On this point, Gluckman's critique of Turner is not simply to be dismissed. Gluckman argued that Turner's distinction between structure and anti-structure is too rigid, and that *communitas* is significant only 'within an established structure which is asserted again afterwards, and which indeed is asserted during the liminal period itself, by inversion' (Gluckman and Gluckman 1977: 242). It is precisely this 'assertion' of the *communitas* spirit into everyday structure that is far from always unproblematic, as we shall intimate in the next final chapters. However, even when he is right, Gluckman is also wrong: the issue is not 'established

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structure’, understood as a rule-bound system, but ‘meaningful order’, in the Voegelinian sense.

The problem was also that 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 narrower understanding of that term. Here Turner was certainly 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 earlier engagement with political anthropology (see Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966) on the surface his work remained largely a political in character, despite the evident relevance of liminality for the study of political and social change (see Thomassen 2012a for a Turner-inspired analysis of political revolutions).¹³

Turner Encounters Dilthey: Tying Together Thought and Experience in Liminality

For Turner, the study of liminality was a study of human experience. That is why he continued to stress the notion of ‘flow’ and ‘flow-experiences’. On this account, Turner’s view that such flow-experiences can be compared across cultures was certainly well-taken. As Turner writes,

Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement [. . . being] a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. . . . we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future. (Turner 1979: 87)

While Turner here drew on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, his understanding is in fact much in line with Lévy-Bruhl’s understanding of ‘fluidity’.¹⁴ Such a dialogue with the work of Lévy-Bruhl, however, had been made impossible due to the latter’s reception history. Eventually, however, Turner’s work gained a philosophical dimension. Central to this is one of the most significant – though still little known – discoveries, or rather encounters, in social theory

¹³ The book entitled *Political Anthropology*, having Turner as one of the editors, was clearly an embryonic attempt to inject a processual approach into the study of politics, but the liminal nature of modern politics was not even hinted at here (see Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966). Even more strikingly, while in the typescript version of his obituary article Peter McClaren mentioned political anthropology as one of Victor Turner’s central areas of work, the term was left out of the published version.

¹⁴ Even this notion of ‘as if’, of life in the conditional, had to some extent been anticipated by van Gennep. On van Gennep’s notion of the ‘world-as-if’, see Belmont (1979: 96–7). We could also mention Turner’s encounter with Sutton-Smith, a colleague in Chicago, who wrote a crucial book on children’s play.

in recent times, the recognition formulated by Victor Turner that Wilhelm Dilthey's efforts to capture the very structures of human experience can be solved through rites of passage and liminality.

Via Dilthey, Turner returned to the perhaps greatest question of modern thought: namely experience and how to understand experience. Experience had been a cornerstone of both Cartesian and Kantian thought, hence of modern philosophy as such.¹⁵ Launching this term was aimed at bringing thought back to reality, towards genuine human concerns, and away from scholasticism and bookish knowledge. However, while for a time 'objective reality' and 'genuinely human' seemed to go hand in hand, with the rise and development of universalistic modern science a major paradox emerged, as a *truly* universal kind of knowledge is less and less compatible with *human* life on *this* planet. The idea that the 'natural' sciences can serve as a model for the social and human sciences ultimately does not convince, as reducing knowledge about human concerns to whatever can be perceived by the senses in a way that can be reproduced and arranged in schemes constructed by the mind, ultimately resulting in large quantities of data processed by computers, is even more remote from any human concerns, and real experiences, as scholasticism ever was. Thus, the calls for a return to experience as a foundational term, voiced by social theorists such as Voegelin, Foucault, Elias and others, are no longer attuned to the universalistic pretences of the 'sciences'.

The pioneer of re-thinking experience, beyond Cartesian-Kantian rationality, was Wilhelm Dilthey.¹⁶ Dilthey's entire work was based on the hypothesis that human experiences are not chaotic. The task of the interpreter is not to impose an external construct on experiences, but rather to elucidate their real, existing, internal structure. To indicate this fundamental difference, Dilthey came up with a new concept, from Goethe: *Erlebnis*, or 'lived experience'. The importance of Dilthey rested with his revolt against Kantian and neo-Kantian thinking. In Kant's worldview, the world itself is chaotic and unordered, and it takes a transcendental mind to make sense of it; but even this is a hopeless task as we can never know the 'thing-in-itself'. Dilthey intuited that human experience is not chaotic and random, to be 'constructed' and ordered by the abstract categories of the transcendental mind; rather, experience has a structure of its own. However, for a series of reasons Dilthey failed to complete his life-work, even his books: both his biography of Schleiermacher and his programmatic *Introduction to the Human Sciences* remained fragments. These were mistakes that German academic life, biased towards systematicity, could not forgive, so

¹⁵ See Szokolczai (2004: 59–66) for further details.

¹⁶ Dilthey is a central figure in modern philosophical hermeneutics, founded by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who produced the first critical edition of Plato's works, and continued by Heidegger and Gadamer.

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even his followers like Weber or Gadamer, among others, tried to minimise, even hide his influence on their thought (see, e.g., Harrington 2001).

Turner encountered Dilthey's work by sheer accident, in the late 1970s, and immediately recognised that his own life-long preoccupations, as contained in the key terms of social drama and liminality, offer a substantiation of Dilthey's insights, and thus help to resolve the long-standing, even key dilemma in European philosophy. Turner even argued that it takes an anthropologist to understand the significance of Dilthey (Turner 1985b: 210). If his reading of Dilthey is still practically unknown, this is largely because Turner died shortly after this intellectual encounter, with his related writings only published posthumously, or remaining almost invisible. Traces of the encounter are contained in a series of late pieces: a crucial, programmatic paper entitled 'Experience and Performance: Towards a New Processual Anthropology', presented first in the 1980 meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), and published posthumously (Turner 1985a); another paper published in the same collection (1985b),¹⁷ which first appeared in a rather low-key 1979 publication (Turner 1979: 60–93); a paper published in a volume originating in the 1980 AAA conference panel (Bruner 1986: 3), but published only after Turner's death (Turner 1986); and the autobiographical Introduction to his last published book (Turner 1982: 7–19). In these pieces, Turner argued that the structure of ritual experience, to be modelled on the three stages of rites of passage, provides a solid 'empirical' basis to Dilthey's attempts to identify the structure of experience. In other words, experiences that we undergo in our own concrete existence follow the way rites of passage are organised, as analysed by van Gennep. Thus, the first stage of a significant life experience is to leave, physically or mentally, our taken for granted world; then, in such a precarious, suspended situation, we literally 'live through' feelings and situations with which we have not yet been familiar; and finally, at the end of this happening, we return to our previous world, and self, though matured and fortified by what we have gone through. In this way Turner identified Dilthey's 'structures of experience' with the triadic, sequential and processual structure of rites of passage that he placed at the core of anthropology. Turner actually solved the perennial problems, only his efforts were buried in a few posthumous essays. The solution is quite simply 'the recognition that the sequential order of a rite of passage is the structure of lived experience' (Szakolczai 2009a: 147).

Against the Kantian framework, Dilthey maintained that knowledge is based on structures of experience that are at once cognitive, affective and volitional – *all* of which contribute to the 'form' of the actual performance itself (as summed up by Turner himself, 1988: 55). Following Turner's own suggestions,

¹⁷ Edith Turner (1985: 14) claimed it was a first publication.

it seems meaningful to suggest that much of our conceptual thought derives from human elaborations of in-betweenness.

This dialogue across ethnography, anthropologically based theorising and continental philosophy is of utmost relevance, *far* more promising and deep-reaching than Durkheim's forced empiricism, pretending to solve the question of knowledge. The Kant–Durkheim approach, in all its later, various off-shots into nominalism, structuralism, Marxism and social constructivism, needs to be replaced by a Nietzsche–van Gennep/Dilthey–Turner genealogy. This has importance far beyond the anthropology of performance; it has importance for how we approach thought, knowledge and experience and how they inter-connect in critical junctures.

All this also has central repercussions on the links between sociology and anthropology, especially concerning methodology. Beyond a mere stress on fieldwork, what we here want to argue is that the potential renewal of social thinking through anthropology goes way beyond this, as it includes the rethinking of philosophy through an anthropological prism – a development which could even involve a radical revalorisation of classical philosophy, especially the work of Plato, which we can only evoke within the limits of this book.

A central focus of Turner's related essays, and the way they further Dilthey, is etymological. Like most other maverick anthropologists discussed in this book, Turner also came to take a strong interest in etymology. Let us be clear here: etymology is not a study of dead letters, standing in contrast to what van Gennep called 'living facts'. Etymology actually assumes its full importance exactly within a sequential-genealogical approach. This is because words are not simply 'derived' from earlier usages that have been handed over and/or changed over time. Words – far from being 'arbitrary' – are themselves condensed symbolic forms, derived from real human experiences and their memory-images; in fact, most of our crucial terms and words probably developed in what Koselleck has called *Sattelzeit* periods, or liminal moments. This was what van Gennep had intuited earlier, and that is why he linked the notion of 'marks' with an attempt to revise existing theories of language. Words are, in a certain sense, distilled symbolic forms that take shape during a period of transition, in which meanings become 'fluid' and therefore open to elaboration.

A detailed analysis of the meanings derived from the Proto-Indo-European root **per* confirms Turner's view that experience is intimately tied to liminality and the passing of a threshold. As previously discussed (in Szokolczai 2009a, in particular 149–50), the primary meaning of **per* is not simply passage, but successful *completion* of a passage. **Per* derivatives also capture the intense emotion that accompanies such attempts, as indicated by terms like 'fear' or 'peril'. A successful passage also assumes a particular ordering in which somebody goes ahead, showing the way or blazing the trail so that others can follow, 'imitating' him, which corresponds to the need for masters of

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ceremonies in rites of passage or formative experiences. This meaning again survives in a series of modern words like ‘premier’, ‘prince’, ‘principle’, ‘priest’, ‘primordial’, or ‘primitive’. Linguists emphasise that the original meaning implied a concrete, spatial rather than temporal sequence, which is fully in congruence with van Gennep’s framework, where he places the spatial or territorial passage before all other ritual passages in the presentation of the ethnographic material (chapter 2 of his book, we remember, is dedicated entirely to the ritual passing of spatial thresholds). Even further, **per* derivatives also capture the idea of ‘birth’, or to ‘bring into the world’, most importantly in ‘parent’, but also as in Italian *partorire* ‘give birth to’; possibly even *pater* ‘father’.

As we have also argued elsewhere (see in particular Szokolczai 2008a), a derivate word, ‘part’, even captures the background horizon of any experience-passage: the ‘home’, from which and towards which any passage is performed as a taking part in something, or as an experience of ‘participation’. In short, the related etymology is extremely dense and Turner was certainly on the right track when opening up the analysis in this direction.

Turner’s related thinking is resumed in the last lines of his posthumously published 1980 paper, which has a testament-like character. After connecting experience and experiment, through Greek and Latin terms, with danger, peril, fear, faring, travel, trial and test, Turner argues that ‘experience is a journey, a test (of self, of suppositions about others), a ritual passage, an exposure to peril and an exposure to fear. Does this not sum up to something akin to fieldwork, even to pilgrimage, which is, again etymologically, a journey “through fields” (*per agros*), a peregrination? Anthropological fieldwork surely deserves its very own kind of *experiential theory*, its own edifice of practical, yet poetical, knowledge’ (Turner 1985a: 226).

This passage and Turner’s reflections on Dilthey lead to many fruitful directions, of which only a few indications can be given here. To begin with, the linguistic investigations can be extended towards Sanskrit, Russian and Hungarian – the latter being particularly intriguing, as not an Indo-European language, and yet the central root *ér* captures such basic modalities of experience as ‘perceive, sense, feel, touch, know, mature, reach, merit, or interest’ (for further details, see Szokolczai 2008a and Horvath and Szokolczai 2018a). Such a focus on experience as a concrete event that tests is also present in Arabic, where terms for experience derive either from the root verb *jaraba*, meaning ‘sample, rehearse, practice, or test’, or the verb *abbara*, meaning ‘state, declare, assert, utter, express, or examine’ (El-Bizri 2004: 51–2); or in Chinese, where *Jingyan* implies three modalities of ‘testing implied in experience as event’ (Shu-Xian 2004: 78–82).

Furthermore, and beyond Dilthey, the term liminality has basic affinities with classical philosophy (Szakolczai 2009a: 142–4). Given that the famous ‘first word’ of Greek philosophy (Patočka 1983), contained in Anaximander’s first fragment, is *apeiron*, meaning ‘limitless’ or ‘unlimited’, linked to the term *peras* extensively examined by Turner, liminality can outright be considered as the very first word of philosophy. The term was also a central category in Pythagorean thought, and was discussed at prominent places in important dialogues by Plato (*Symposium* and *Philebus*). Another important term of Greek philosophy, present both in Plato and Aristotle, and central for Voegelin’s conceptualisation of experience, is *metaxy*, or ‘being in between’, which again literally means liminality. Even further, the connection between liminality and pilgrimage, and in general walking, is again fundamental, central to Turner’s later work, as he published in 1978, together with Edith Turner, a classic book on pilgrimage, and was close to recognising that pilgrimage, and long-distance walking, with its dynamics of leaving home for a significant experience through travel, in order to return eventually (see Dupront 1987), is perhaps an even more basic model for experience, through liminality, than a formalised rite of passage (see again Horvath and Szakolczai 2018a).

The passage cited earlier ends with an explicit methodological note, a call to renew anthropology. It was taken up, unknowingly, by Colin Turnbull, in a chapter written just a few years later.

Turnbull Encounters Turner: Liminality as Transformation and Total Participation

The argument not only of this chapter, but in a way of this book, in particular concerning liminality, experience, participation and the methodology proper to anthropology and social science, can be concluded through a quite extraordinary article by Colin Turnbull, whom we discussed previously. The piece is special on a number of different accounts: published in 1990, it is an intellectual testament of Turnbull, who by then had long since retired and was far away from academic life, but here reflects on the central concerns of his own work; it is also a direct, explicit reflection on a key term (liminality) of two key maverick anthropologists (van Gennep and Victor Turner) by another; and it is so simply by its qualities, as the connections established here between liminality, experience and participation offer a genuinely new and potentially foundational ‘methodological’ perspective, in the classical sense of the ‘way’ (*hodos*), for the social sciences.

While Turnbull shows no awareness of Turner’s articles on Dilthey and experience, which at any rate had been published only shortly before, it can be best understood as a continuation, and at several levels, of this effort. Just as Turner discovered Dilthey quite late, but then reinterpreted his work in light of

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Dilthey's, Turnbull does the same here through Turner's.¹⁸ Furthermore, while a main reason why Dilthey could not complete his work on experience was that he did not manage to break sufficiently with the scientific pretences of Kant-inspired German philosophy, Turnbull similarly argues that Turner and van Gennep did not use the full potential of liminality as they remained caught up in the empiricistic focus on transition (Turnbull 1990: 50, 55, 73, 76–7). While this claim is not fully right, as van Gennep was certainly not a rationalist, it still has a deep truth to it – as it is always the case even with Turnbull's exaggerations. As the article makes it evident, even explicitly, Turnbull was able to develop such an innovative 'method' only on the basis of his first encounters with the Mbuti Pygmies, his eventual 'objects' of study, as then he was not yet trained as an anthropologist. One has to be extremely cautious here, just as Turnbull is in his piece. Echoing Radin, he by no means claims that such training, or even rationality and objectivity as commonly understood, are pointless, just that they are not sufficient; and, even worse, it can be seriously misleading, and at any rate unsatisfactory, if they are followed exclusively, and especially if such 'objectivity' frames the first encounter. We can truly understand the reality of feelings and practices only if we experienced them closely; if we shared or participated in them. The article is structured around three major trips Turnbull made to the Pygmies, in 1951, 1954, and 1957–8, representing stages of increasing consciousness, but valorising the unconscious and participatory starting point. Thus, using the terminology introduced in the Turnbull section (see Chapter 4), he was able to write his book, and eventually develop such a methodological perspective, only as he was actually 'driven' there, 'by the sheer accident of being plunged into a number of different cultural contexts long before I had even heard of anthropology' (51).

According to the so-called 'scientific method' in the social sciences, which is rather an imitation of methods purportedly used in the 'natural' sciences,¹⁹ the only valid knowledge is what is universally true, and thus, in order to gain such a knowledge, one needs to posit oneself outside the concrete time and place in which one 'accidentally' happens to be. However, given that we are human beings who live on planet Earth, it is deeply questionable whether anthropologists who are 'professionally' committed to study such beings, i.e. *ourselves*, should try at any cost to accede to such exterior position. In fact, the very premise of anthropology, from the academic institutionalisation of the

¹⁸ While Turnbull's mentor, Rodney Needham, played an important role in the rediscovery of van Gennep in British anthropology, Turnbull does not refer to van Gennep in his two key books, though – importantly – his 1983 book *The Human Cycle* would be dedicated to him.

¹⁹ Not the sciences of nature, which accept nature as a given, but rather the modern efforts trying to probe into the ultimate components and origins of the world, with the direct or implicit pretention that 'we' as humans can 'improve' the 'world', thus refusing to accept as it is, so having – according to Nietzsche's perspective (see *Will to Power*, 585, and *Gay Science*, 346) – inherently nihilistic affinities.

discipline, and in an important contrast to much of sociology, is that to understand human beings living in cultural worlds different from our own, the pretence of exteriority is untenable. This led to the elaboration of technical terms like ‘fieldwork’ and ‘participatory observation’; methods and techniques which, with the collapse of the project ‘rigorous objective science’, are increasingly used by sociologists as well.

However, Turnbull’s approach starts by arguing that participant observation is not enough: the idea that the “‘participant observation’ technique provides us with a corrective to counterbalance our otherwise totally external view of culture’ is simply an ‘absurd assumption’, rendered evident by the characteristics of liminal phenomena (Turnbull 1990: 50), and the necessarily participatory and experiential aspects these involve. Thus, ignoring and even repressing the ideas of van Gennep, Tarde, Lévy-Bruhl, Radin and Bateson were in fact vital for Durkheim, Boas and their disciples, as the pretence of objective and rationalist, positivistic and empirical science can be maintained only by actively ignoring liminality and participation. Thus, even Turnbull was unaware of liminality in his major ethnographic books, and so now, in this crucial article, he revisits his own work, and the experiences on which it was based, in the light of this concept, while at the same time argues that his own experiences and studies, especially through the particular sequential order in which he deepened his own awareness and participation, help to increase the understanding offered through, and about, liminal phenomena.

Total Participation: Revalorising the Anthropological Method

The central term introduced by Turnbull, ‘total participation’, is particularly important, as it immediately and directly adds a Maussian angle to his perspective otherwise dominated by a Lévy-Bruhlian reading of van Gennep and Victor Turner. The term ‘total’ is immediately bound to raise eyebrows, with its presumed affinity with totalitarianism; this, however, is mistaken, as we have shown in our Chapter 3. ‘Gift relations’, just as participation in life, are indeed total, as in the most basic experiences, and relations, of our lives we participate fully, without any prior reservation, limit or condition. The love of a parent for a child, or the commitment of two people who love each other, knows no limits, and includes the sacrifice of one’s life – *unless* something extraordinary and unthinkable happens that renders such a link invalid. Such exceptions, however, actually reinforce the rule and do not render it invalid.

Turnbull takes great care in presenting his ideas about ‘total participation’, repeatedly returning to it. His ideas elaborated in this short essay can be considered as a major rethinking of the very fundamentals, and methods, of anthropological research. There is something truly perplexing involved here, a kind of Kierkegaardian situation of ‘Either/Or’: while Turnbull was charged,

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in the campaign started by Barth's letter, as falling short of basic standards in anthropological research, in this article he argues that his work rather contains a substantial *renewal* of anthropological methods – and here we fully support him. The new methodological paradigm can be named as a shift from 'field-work' as 'participant observation' to *field experience as total participation*. The idea of 'participant observation' was developed in anthropology to give time for researchers to familiarise themselves with otherwise unknown areas and practices. However, Turnbull argues that this is not sufficient; it still preserves the basic separation between the anthropologist as someone external to the practices in which the natives are engaged, and is thus bound to miss their real meaning. Instead, proper anthropological understanding requires the '*total involvement* of our whole being'; or that we 'truly and fully participate' (Turnbull 1990: 51, 76, 79; see especially the section 'The merits of total participation', 74–5). This requires an 'intensive involvement' where the 'experience of being present' includes that we are part of the activities and that these 'fill [our] whole being' (52).

Conventional methodology argues against such an idea, claiming that in this way we give up our capacities of rational thinking, or 'scientific objectivity'. Turnbull, at one level, agrees that we indeed must suspend not only our reasoning power, but even our very selves, including the loss of conscious control (Turnbull 1990: 56–7, 66–7, 75, 79), even the 'total sacrifice of the academic as well as the individual self' (76). Thus, when fully participating in such a practice, with the 'natives', it might happen that 'when certain songs were sung, the whole outside world . . . ceased to exist' (67). If this were the end-point of the analysis, Turnbull could be charged with promoting 'going native'. However, this is emphatically *not* the case, as Turnbull did not 'go native'. This is only a *risk*; the risk involved in *any* experience worthy of the name, following Turner's take on Dilthey. We give up our selves, in key experiences, only so that at the end we would gain it back, fortified, deepened and improved; transformed, and *yet* the same. Thus, a proper field experience is a truly *liminal* phenomenon, in the sense in which liminality is not only transitional, but transformative – one of the central points repeatedly argued in the paper, the point where Turnbull claims to go beyond van Gennep and Turner, though both were in fact moving in the exact same direction. Thus, in 'the very act of total participation and awareness of my personal feelings at that moment and in that place . . . a transformation takes place, not a mere transition, and this has everything to do with our understanding of liminality and, I believe, calls for a rethinking of what we mean by that term' (73; see also 55, 64–6, 77, 80).

But this is not all. It is not only our selves that we regain, if we are strong enough to risk losing it – though only in the right manner, being sure that we would gain it back, and not make an irresponsible leap into the void, just as

a contemporary, increasingly popular practice as parkour also teaches how we can recognise our own inner force. Rather, the idea is by no means incompatible with the collection of primary data and its analysis by rational thinking. Quite on the contrary, direct and total participation ‘provides a wealth of data that could never be acquired by any other means’ (Turnbull 1990: 51), offering ‘insights that would have been impossible to come by [through mere] intellectual curiosity’ (52), and which one ‘might well have missed with such an objective, academic approach’ (53). It even ‘provid[es] “hard data” that might well not be otherwise readily accessible’ (76), and compared to which information gained through formal training – while not irrelevant in itself – ‘is secondary in importance’ (66). Even further, far from being incompatible with rational thinking and analysis, it is exactly such ‘hard data’ gained through participatory experience ‘that led, *later* [emphasis added], to the most valuable speculations’ (73), as these are exactly the ‘moments of abandon’ that can serve as a ‘basis for the most fruitful subsequent investigation’ (75). In the context of a liminal experience ‘subjectivity and emotional involvement are no longer incompatible with objectivity and reason’ (76), as such an experience, including its transformative elements, ‘is a mode of perception’, being ‘not at all unlike [the] use of the rational process by which we recognise without any discomfort that things are seldom, if ever, what they seem to be’ (79). While any purely ‘objective’ study, whether focusing on structures and functions, or on reversal or rebellion (75), stays on the surface, being preoccupied with matters of secondary importance, missing something central, remaining ‘entirely intellectual and, all too often, spectacularly acrobatic but ultimately meaningless’ (79), rendering anthropology ‘empty and barren’ (81), total participation helps us move beyond the limited horizon of problem-solving (70–71), towards understanding practices that are concerned with curing or make feeling good (57, 66), two terms that for the Mbuti Pygmies are identical, as ‘in their own words, whatever *is*, when that moment is reached, is good, otherwise it would not, could not, *be*’ (72), thus ‘transforming an emotional state of some anguish into contentment’ (52).

It might be easy to dismiss Turnbull’s ideas, using extreme examples, like the committing of criminal or otherwise repulsive acts; but this would only amount to misunderstanding the wisdom of these ideas through a standard modernist trick by which exceptions are allowed to rule reasoning, a trick for which generations of analytical philosophers are systematically trained. Turnbull’s point, however, is rather about the necessity of participation for the possibility of rational understanding, and in this sense it is very close to the point made by Alessandro Pizzorno (2007), a major social theorist and his exact coeval, concerning the very meaning of rationality, in one of his last, similarly crucial writings. According to Pizzorno (171), an action or a statement cannot be adjudicated as rational or not from the outside, as ‘the declarations that come

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from those who participate in a social situation, if separated from a context, are not intelligible by observers who do not participate'; and so '[o]bservers and actors, by definition, can only understand each other if the observers assume the role of actors, and vice versa'.²⁰

Such activities, where understanding presents particular difficulties, primarily involve religious practices, or other manifestations of the Spirit. Turnbull readily admits the centrality of such phenomena for his methodological perspective: while 'this kind of experience is easily enough dismissed as romantic, if the critic is kind, or as unmitigated mystical trash, if the critic really feels threatened [but] unless we learn to deal with the concept of the Spirit we are going to continue misunderstanding and misrepresenting the phenomena of religious belief and practice' (Turnbull 1990: 74), resulting, instead of understanding, in a 'mere exercise in ethnocentric intellectual gymnastics' (51). Through total participation, instead, we might approach the greatest of dilemmas around religious experience, the connection in such transformative experiences between emptiness and the void, as evident through the vacant gaze (56), and the fullness of presence (66), ultimate manifestations of sacred power (63–5), moving towards something perceived as holy, or 'a timeless state of grace' (80).²¹

²⁰ For a shortened English version, see Pizzorno (2008). Incidentally Pizzorno's argument helps to understand why the technique of analytical philosophy referred to above is a sheer trick: it rules out of court any references to context; thus universalistic arguments about extreme cases indeed are meaningless mental exercises – the 'spectacular acrobatics', mentioned by Turnbull (see p. 194 above).

²¹ While the chapter also contains some more problematic elements, such as occasional lapses in terminology, invoking terms like 'subjectivity', 'concept', 'synthesis', participation as 'technique', and references to theatricality and performance, these do not impinge on the argument, and so we cannot address them within the limits of this chapter.