

RITUAL THEORY, RITUAL PRACTICE

Catherine Bell

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

4

Action and Practice

Most attempts to define ritual proceed by formulating the universal qualities of an autonomous phenomenon. They maintain, however provisionally, that there is something we can generally call ritual and whenever or wherever it occurs it has certain distinctive features. Such definitions inevitably come to function as a set of criteria for judging whether some specific activities can be deemed ritual. As a result, these definitions of ritual are not complete when they set up a single universal construct; additional categories are needed to account for all the data that do not fit neatly into the domain of the original term. Definitions of ritual must go on to suggest, explicitly or implicitly, the nature and relation of nonritual activity and various degrees of nearly-but-not-quite-ritual behavior. Hence, a good deal of writing about ritual involves extensive exercises in cleaning up all the data and terms that are not included in the main definition. As a taxonomic enterprise, universal categories have made undisputed contributions to the organization and extension of both empirical observation and particular knowledge systems. Yet with regard to the study of ritual, the initial usefulness of this approach may have begun to give way to a bewildering number of problems.

First of all, categorization develops a dizzying momentum of its own. The plethora of "ritual types," as Grimes points out, demonstrates how little certainty there is "in identifying either ritual's center or boundaries." Distinctions are routinely drawn between ritual studies and liturgics, religious ritual and secular ritual, ritual and ceremonial, secular ritual and secular ceremony, political ritual

and civic ceremonial, private ritual and collective ritual, rites of rebellion and rites of solidarity, dramatic performance and ritual performance, the formality of games (in play and organized sports) and the formality of ritual, ritual and festival, festival and holiday, and so on.² As distinctions and categories proliferate, scholars begin to talk in rather elaborate circles. For example, Monica Wilson set up an important early model by distinguishing ritual from ceremonial. Goody subsequently recast Wilson's distinction by placing ritual within a more widely embracing understanding of ceremonial. Gluckman, in turn, took Goody's revision of Wilson's categories and inverted it to make ceremonial a subset of ritual.³

There is another serious consequence of such definitions of ritual. The categories of activity so defined tend to override and undermine the significance of indigenous distinctions among ways of acting.⁴ At best, culturally specific distinctions may be noted in the attempt to discern the nuances of some particular expression of the universal phenomenon, but the 'universal' always impoverishes the 'particular.' In this way, the definitional approach to ritual loses sight of what may be the more useful questions that can be brought to bear on ritual activities of various kinds: Under what circumstances are such activities distinguished from other forms of activity? How and why are they distinguished? What do these activities do that other activities cannot or will not do?

To take up these questions it is necessary to break free of the entrenched tendency to define ritual either as a distinct and autonomous set of activities or as an aspect of all human activity. Yet, as Lewis notes, most influential theories of ritual belong to one of these two camps: some stress the distinctiveness of ritual, how it is clearly different from all other kinds of activity; others stress the congruity of ritual with other forms of human action, usually by seeing ritual as "the expressive, symbolical or communicative aspect" of action in general.⁵ The first group usually proceeds by contrasting ritual/magical activity with technical/utilitarian activity. Hence, in ritual activity the relationship between ends and means is described as rule-governed, routinized, symbolic, or noninstrumental. By contrast, technical activity is described as pragmatic, spontaneous, and instrumentally effective.⁶ Sometimes ritual is seen to possess both expressive and instrumental aspects simultaneously.⁷ Yet even in this last formulation, the expressive aspects

of ritual are usually considered to be more authentic to ritual per se than its pragmatic aspects, which may even be characterized as magical.

In descriptions of the noninstrumental nature of ritual activity as symbolic or expressive activity (i.e., communicative in some way), the fundamental contrast of symbolic versus instrumental underscores how ritual activities are seen to differ from more "practical" ones. An interesting use of this perspective can be seen in studies of "rituals of resistance," which are concerned with subcultures and the differentiation of group identities.⁸ In exploring "symbolic" forms of resistance to the dominant culture among working-class youth groups in Great Britain, two studies suggest that such symbolic forms effectively constitute group identity and ethos but not politically effective forms of resistance, such as might be found among activists making a real (nonsymbolic?) break with the dominant ideology. That is, apolitical resistance to the dominant ideology is embodied in what the authors see as "rituals of style" in contrast to more politically pragmatic activities.

Despite these sociological uses, the distinction between ritual and instrumental activity can easily collapse into a distinction between the rational and the irrational or the logical and the emotional.⁹ Hence, the identification of ritual with symbolic as opposed to instrumental action has also led to descriptions of ritual as cathartic performances that are responses to situations of anxiety or fear.¹⁰ The great debate between Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth on the relationship of ritual and anxiety essentially reflected the need to account for the existence of nonutilitarian practices among people who were incredibly practical in most things.¹¹ Ritual, as activities that yield no practical result, it was argued, probably function to reduce anxiety. In developing his theory, Malinowski went on to replicate the initial distinction between practical and nonpractical activities by differentiating two forms of ritual as well, magical rites (for which the native can state a practical purpose) and religious rites (for which no practical purpose is given).¹² Another tack suggests that ritual exhibits and exaggerates real conflicts in order to release tensions and afford a type of social catharsis.¹³ It was along this line of thinking, of course, that V. Turner developed his early notion of ritual as social drama and helped to usher in a 'performance' approach to ritual.¹⁴

Among the many problems attending efforts to distinguish ritual from other forms of human activity, most immediate is the fact that a distinction between technical practical and ritual symbolic activities often reflects categories rather alien to the peoples involved.¹⁵ Long ago Mauss pointed to the lack of such distinctions among "primitive peoples" as mandating analysis of the "total man."¹⁶ Aside from how alien the ritual-instrumental distinction may be to many societies and the ease with which this distinction collapses into a problematic dichotomy of rational and irrational behavior, a third and more subtle critique has also been made of these approaches to ritual. It focuses on the tendency to cast activity, ritual or otherwise, as an object and thus as the completed, or "dead," execution of a system.¹⁷ When activity is analyzed and categorized as something already finished, the very nature of activity as such is lost. Although this critique was made by performance theorists, it is also implicit in practice theory, as I will show shortly.

In recent years the second group of ritual theories, those that tend to see ritual as an aspect of all activity, has been dominant in the literature, pushing out the older perspective of ritual as a distinct category of behavior. For example, in his challenge to the "referent" of the term "ritual," Goody points out that "'routinisation', regularisation, repetition, lie at the basis of social life itself."¹⁸ Others have argued that ritual is a form of communication just like language. Although he describes ritual as noninstrumental, Roy Rappaport also notes that the formality associated with ritual is actually a matter of a continuum of formality found in all behavior. Rappaport uses the term "ritual" in the singular to refer to this formal aspect of all behavior, and "rituals" in the plural for those "invariant events" completely dominated by formality. Ultimately, he argues, rituals communicate by virtue of their formal features, rather than their symbolic and expressive features, although these are the features he finds least distinctive about ritual.¹⁹ Wuthnow invokes a simpler form of Rappaport's argument: he suggests that symbolic and utilitarian activities can be differentiated only in terms of the *degree* to which they are expressive or communicative—and ritual, therefore, as the symbolic and expressive, constitutes some dimension of all social activity.²⁰

Other theories stress the communicative nature of ritual in terms

of either linguistic structures, primarily using Saussurean structuralism, or performative structures, applying the work of Austin and Searle.²¹ Mary Douglas, for example, states that "ritual is pre-eminently a form of communication" composed of culturally normal acts that have become distinctive by being diverted to special functions where they are given magical efficacy.²² Leach also argues that "we engage in rituals in order to transmit collective messages to ourselves."²³ Elsewhere, he goes further and suggests that "speech itself is a form of ritual."²⁴ Tambiah's performative approach, noted in Part I, also represents an example of this perspective.

Among the various theories sharing a concern with the ritual dimension of all behavior, ethological studies of ritualization in animals and humans are particularly serious about the universal features of ritual. They cannot claim, however, the unqualified appreciation of other universalists.²⁵ Sir Julian Huxley first configured the term "ritualization" to indicate "the adaptive formalization or canalization of emotionally motivated behavior, under the teleonomic pressure of natural selection."²⁶ In Huxley's ethological framework, ritualization among both animals and humans served "to secure more effective communication ('signalling') function, reduction of intra-group damage, or better intra-group bonding."²⁷ Richard Schechner emphasizes the idea that this ritual form of communication arises in situations where any misunderstanding, or "mis-signaling," would be catastrophic.²⁸ The wide variety of activities that have come to be analyzed as ritualized behavior patterns—aggression and combat, song, play, sport, grooming, courting and mating, drama, dance, humor, art, and even thought itself—testifies to the promiscuous tendencies of this approach.²⁹ It identifies ritual with formal communicative functions and then finds ritual to some degree in all or most activity.³⁰ Some obvious problems result. Making everything a matter of ritual to some degree broadens the question to proportions impossible to organize. As Meyer Fortes pointed out, it is a short step from the proposition that everything is ritual to the practical reality that nothing is ritual.³¹ Playing with the application of a similarly broad-based understanding of ritual, Lévi-Strauss suggested the ludicrous conclusions that alien ethnographers might come to when observing our emotional adherence to the "white line ritual" while driving.³²

Another example is seen in the curious lengths to which Wuthnow takes his analyses when he focuses on the ritual aspects of signaling a turn in traffic and the collective viewing of a television program.³³

With these objections an impasse appears to loom. On the one hand there is evidence that ritual acts are not a clear and closed category of social behavior. On the other hand many problems attend the attempt to see ritual as a dimension of all or many forms of social behavior. How can the distinguishing features of so-called ritual activities be approached without cutting ritual off from what it shares with social activity in general? One solution to this impasse would suggest that we refer to the particular circumstances and cultural strategies that generate and differentiate activities from each other. This approach, which assumes a focus on social action in general, would then look to how and why a person acts so as to give some activities a privileged status vis-à-vis others. Rather than impose categories of what is or is not ritual, it may be more useful to look at how human activities establish and manipulate their own differentiation and purposes—in the very doing of the act within the context of other ways of acting.

With this approach in mind, I will use the term 'ritualization' to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.

Practice Theory

It is not easy to focus on how activity, in the very act, differentiates itself from other activities. One needs a perspective on activity that can facilitate an exploration of the dynamics of social action in general. The notion of 'practice' has been an obvious place to start. Heralded as the "key symbol" of an emerging theoretical orienta-

tion in anthropology, practice would appear to be a ready tool to explore ritualization as a way of acting.³⁴ Ever since Karl Marx the term has been invoked specifically to transcend dichotomies that "wrongly divide" human experience. Nonetheless, the term frequently succumbs to many of the expediences of theoretical discourse demonstrated in Part I.

Some of the problems with the term go back to Marx and the flexible ways in which he used it.³⁵ There appear to be two basic senses to the notion of practice in his work. In the first sense the term is explored as descriptive of human nature and all human activity. In a second sense the term appears to be more prescriptive, arguing for the proper way of being theoretical and using theory. In the first, descriptive sense, practice was a methodological focus through which to solve the problems posed by the work of Hegel on the one hand and Feuerbach on the other—namely, the relationship between consciousness and reality, subject and object, idealism and materialism. In that sense, Marx defined practice as "practical activity," a unity of consciousness and social being characterized by the potential to transform real existence. As such, practice was nothing less than the irreducible unity of real human existence itself. In this framework, practice mediates or reintegrates subject and object (consciousness and reality), which is to say that these polarized constructs are thought to exist only as they exist in and through practice. The second, or prescriptive, sense emerges in Marx's other analyses, where practice is seen as inextricably related to theory. There is a dialectical relationship in which practice both actualizes and tests theory while also providing the data for ongoing theory. This dialectical unity of theory and practice was meant to indict the inadequacy of abstract thinking, knowledge, and truth. At the same time, it gave theory an important place in the practice of political activity.

These different uses of the term in Marx crop up again, of course, in the various emphases of more recent studies. Certainly the term has been invoked to redress those "bourgeois categories" that falsely distinguish the individual from society or the sign from the referent.³⁶ For example, "signifying practices," a term coined by the Tel Quel circle in Paris, not only opposes "the prevailing notion of a transparent relation between sign and referent, signification and reality," but also emphasizes the creativity over and above the mere

reproductivity of practice.³⁷ Language, art, and style, as examples of signifying practices, have been analyzed as active forces that create or transform reality.

Writers only partially aligned with Marxism will also invoke the term practice as a way to evade what they see as the materialist empiricism of much traditional ethnology on the one hand and as the ahistorical abstract idealism of Saussure's or Lévi-Strauss's structuralism on the other. In this context, practice is used to denote a dialectic of the material and the symbolic, the real and the perceived, the structure and the act. That is, practice synthesizes and transcends the materialism and idealism associated with each pole of the dialectic itself. For example, despite his judgment that Marx's praxis concerned only material activity and as such was unable to account for "the symbolic order of culture," Sahlin attempted to rescue the term in the guise of "cultural praxis." The notion of cultural praxis is used to articulate a dynamic at the heart of social and cultural life which cannot be reduced to either pole of the dialectic of which it is composed—*langue* and *parole*, or structure and history.³⁸

Whereas Sahlin uses the notion of practice to formulate a theory of culture that can recognize symbolic and historical dimensions, the notion is also used by those concerned with the related issue of social agency. These anthropologists are wont to posit practice in some relation to culture so as to explicate the dynamics by which the social world is both structured and structuring, that is, both shaped by practice and shaping of practice in turn. Hence, Jean Comaroff uses the term to indicate the process of communicative social action by which persons, in acting upon an external and objective order of power relations, construct themselves as social beings, molded but not determined. The construction of social beings is simultaneously the very generation or reproduction of culture.³⁹ For Ortner as well, the system of structures that are the basis of a culture interact with 'human practice' to yield culture internalized as the 'self' in social actors.⁴⁰

As a term that is designed to represent the synthetic unity of consciousness and social being within human activity, 'practice' appears to be a powerful tool with which to embrace or transcend all analogous dichotomies. And that, of course, is one of its problems. Even in Marx's usage the term comes to play two roles,

encouraging a slip from one level of argument to another. In one role practice is seen as the synthetic unity and resolution of the dichotomy of consciousness and social being. Simultaneously, however, practice is also cast in a second role where, as synthetic practical activity, it is contrasted with theory as the *activity of consciousness* (or with "structure," as in Sahlin's) with which it forms the poles of another dichotomy. This second dichotomy is frequently invoked in order to resolve it into a third term, the dialectical synthesis of "historical process" (or again, as in Sahlin's analysis, "cultural praxis").

A second problem that afflicts the Marxist usage of the term practice is the inherent privileging of terms afforded by positing fundamental oppositions. One term gradually comes to dominate the other until the first term is seen as the source of the second term. In the extensive literature on formulations of the relationship of base and superstructure in Marxism, for example, consciousness has been variously described as *caused* by practice (e.g., the superstructure caused or produced by the base) or as *expressive* of practice (e.g., the superstructure expresses the real conditions of the base).⁴¹ In both cases, consciousness becomes derivative. In a similar pattern in cultural anthropology the notion of 'structure' often comes to dominate 'act,' rendering activity merely expressive of more primary structures.⁴²

The privileged terms in the dichotomies of Marxists on the one hand and cultural anthropologists on the other differ, of course. Anthropological arguments, such as those of Geertz or Sahlin's, subtly privilege thought, structure, and the synchronic, thereby rendering act, performance, and the diachronic as secondary and dependent. Marxists, however, with the exception of Louis Althusser, privilege practice, thus appearing to be less committed to the constitution of theoretical discourse and the status of the theorist than to historical process and the importance of political struggle.⁴³

A third problem afflicting practice theory arises with the mediating role that practice is meant to play. Practice is said to mediate consciousness and social being, or structure and act, which in turn are said to exist only in and through practice. However, in actual fact, the concept of practice is a secondary and unstable synthesis of these pairs of categories and it tends to keep collapsing into its underlying components. Thus, practice does not really mediate: it

is 'constructed' in order to generate a synthetic abstraction that serves as the object and method of a particular discourse. Practice is not deconstructed to see how practical activity itself might give rise to 'consciousness' or 'structure.' Practice continually gets caught in these analytical patterns because it is being used for a particular end, namely, to generate a discourse based upon an object of analysis tied to a concomitant method of analysis. This purposive end is signaled by arguments that explicitly address the need to transcend the dilemma of objectivism and subjectivism.

Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, a manifesto for neo-Marxist literary analysis, opens with a discussion of the formal dilemma of all cultural study today: "the struggle for priority between models and history," between theory and history, and theory and practice. Jameson maintains that the sterility of theory which rewrites texts in terms of its own aesthetic on the one hand and the inaccessible past of historicism on the other can be transcended only through the practice of Marxist political-historical theory.⁴⁴ For Jameson, therefore, in the end it is the theorist's *practice* of Marxist *theory* that is seen to resolve the bifurcations of theory and practice or models and history. We saw a version of this model in the discussion of Geertz in Part I.

Pierre Bourdieu elaborates an influential analysis of practice which also exemplifies the traditional strengths and weaknesses of this term. The opening pages of his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* describe the need to transcend the subjective categories of native experience as well as the objective categories of the outside observer.⁴⁵ His science of practice, he argues, will not only overcome the contradictions of objectivism and subjectivism, but it will *save* both by making them into necessary but incomplete stages in the dialectical method of his science.⁴⁶ He then defines practice itself in terms of a dialectical relationship between a structured environment (by which he invokes "objectivist structures," which are not necessarily the real world but an agent's practical interpretation of the world) and the structured dispositions engendered in people which lead them to reproduce the environment even in a transformed form. He calls this a "dialectic of objectification and incorporation."⁴⁷ Hence, in a second stage, the object of analysis, practice, is also a dialectic, a dialectic of "objectivism" and "subjectivism." The method and the object constitute each other.

Ortner takes a somewhat different approach. She lays out a theory of practice that is "a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand, and the nature of human action on the other."⁴⁸ Practice theory, in this formulation, continuously translates from action to structure and structure to action. Any action is an instance of practice *if* the theorist establishes its relationship to structure. At times it appears that Ortner is not so much proposing a theory of practice, with practice as the object of scrutiny out there, but a way of analyzing that involves the construction of the category of practice. At the root of this distinction is, of course, Marx's two uses of practice—as the nature of all human activity and as a way of doing theory. Ortner does not emphasize how a focus on practice, or even the construct of practice, is a means for appreciating action and structure as a dynamic whole. She is not interested in synthesizing wholes. On the contrary, Ortner creates oppositions (like structure and action, as well as objectivism and subjectivism) and resists any explicit synthesis that resolves or embraces them. She speaks of practice theory as a "controlling framework" in which such real oppositions, which might never be mediated, are "accepted" instead.⁴⁹

In his discussion of *habitus* Bourdieu presents yet another solution to the problem of where and how to formulate practice. This Latin term was first used by Mauss to describe the culturally acquired abilities and faculties associated with his concept of the "total man."⁵⁰ For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is, most simply, the set of habitual dispositions through which people "give shape and form to social conventions."⁵¹ A more complete definition would add that the *habitus* is the principle by which individual and collective practices are produced and the matrix in which objective structures are realized within the (subjective) dispositions that produce practices. Bourdieu implies that the *habitus* is an instance of practice, an irreducible 'unit' of culture that cannot be broken down into any autonomous, constitutive forces. In this analysis, practice is real, but action and structure as components of practice would be mere theoretical constructs. That is to say, 'cultural structures' and 'the act itself' exist nowhere except in the theorist's analysis of the *habitus*. The types of structures that Ortner and Sahlin are concerned to affirm are, in Bourdieu's framework, nothing more than the schemes implicit in practice.⁵²

Habitus is an awkward but explicit formulation of the real insight within Bourdieu's work on practice, namely, the need "to confront the act itself." With regard to myth, for example, he argues that we should approach a myth neither as an object (a completed event laid out neatly for analysis) nor in terms of some mythopoetic subjectivity, but as the very act of myth-making. It is possible to confront the act itself in this way, he writes, only by addressing the principle that generates, organizes, and unifies all practices—"the socially informed body, with its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its senses." These senses, Bourdieu goes on to explain, include "the traditional five senses—which never escape the structuring action of social determinisms—but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humor and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on."⁵³

In most societies the "sense of ritual" would be a vital addition to this list. It is through a socially acquired sense of ritual that members of a society know how to improvise a birthday celebration, stage an elaborate wedding, or rush through a minimally adequate funeral.⁵⁴ Of course, possession of this sense of ritual does not mean that members of a community always agree on how to do a ritual or what to make of it. Disagreements over ritual can be as fierce or as casual as those over honor or artistic beauty. Yet with regard to Geertz's example of the Javanese child's funeral, for example, a focus on the sense of ritual would shift the emphasis from how the rite failed to fulfill Geertz's theoretical model of ritual, as well as Javanese ideals of *iklas* and *rukun*, to how minimal ritual procedures were improvised with sufficient respect for tradition that the child was considered buried more or less satisfactorily.⁵⁵

Confronting the ritual act itself, and therein eschewing ritual as some object to be analyzed or some subjectivity to be fathomed, would involve asking how ritual activities, in their doing, generate distinctions between what is or is not acceptable ritual. From this perspective one could not seek to construct a theory or model of ritual practice. Rather one could attempt to describe the strategies of the ritualized act by deconstructing some of the intricacies of its

cultural logic. This is the perspective that will be developed in the rest of Part II.⁵⁶ This exploration of the distinctive strategies and cultural logic that lie behind ritual activities may also begin to illuminate the distinctive strategies of theoretical practices.

The Features of Practice

To focus on the act itself practice must be taken as a nonsynthetic and irreducible term for human activity. I will use the term to highlight four features of human activity. Practice is (1) situational; (2) strategic; (3) embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing; and (4) able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world, or what I will call 'redemptive hegemony.' Each of these features will be discussed individually and then used as a basis with which to describe ritual activity.

First, human activity is situational, which is to say that much of what is important to it cannot be grasped outside of the specific context in which it occurs. When abstracted from its immediate context, an activity is not quite the same activity. Practice may embody determinative influences deriving from other situations, but practice is not the mere expression or effect of these influences. Indeed, it can be said that a focus on the act itself renders these 'influences' (structures or sources) nonexistent except insofar as they exist within the act itself.⁵⁷

Jonathan Culler makes this point in a different context when he argues that analysis of "the relationship between a literary work and a social and historical reality is not one of reflected content but of a play of forms" within the work itself. "The interplay between a literary work and its historical ground lies in the way its formal devices exploit, transform, and supplement a culture's way of producing meaning."⁵⁸ Yet Culler focuses solely on literary practices within the text as an object and not, as our foregoing analysis demands, on textual practices *per se*. Therefore, it is useful to turn to Edward Said's example. Said provides a complementary corrective with his description of the "worldliness" of texts, by which he means that texts are cultural entities that act in the world.⁵⁹ Internal textual analysis, for which the text is an object, he argues, will lose itself in an

"endless deferral of meaning," never grasping that the text is not a disembodied object but a practical set of actions involving the realities of power and authority. Indeed, Said is concerned with "how a text, by *being* a text, by insisting upon and employing all the devices of textuality" functions in the world to "dislodge other texts."⁶⁰ His insights into textual practices are useful for thinking about ritual practices as well.

As a second feature of human activity, practice is inherently strategic, manipulative, and expedient.⁶¹ The logic of practice (and there is a logic of sorts) is not that of an intellectualist logic, argues Bourdieu. Practice, as real activity in time, by its very nature dodges the relations of intellectualist logic and excludes the questions asked by the analyst.⁶² Its practical or instrumental logic is strategic and economic in that it remains as implicit and rudimentary as possible. Practice, therefore, is a ceaseless play of situationally effective schemes, tactics, and strategies—"the intentionless invention of regulated improvisation."⁶³

The third feature intrinsic to practice is a fundamental 'misrecognition' of what it is doing, a misrecognition of its limits and constraints, and of the relationship between its ends and its means.⁶⁴ An appreciation of the dynamics of misrecognition as such goes back to the Marxist argument that a society could not exist "unless it disguised to itself the real basis of that existence."⁶⁵ However, the idea has been developed in a variety of ways—in the notion of *aporia* developed by Jacques Derrida, in Althusser's notion of "a sighting in an oversight," or in Paul DeMan's discussion of "blindness and insight."

Bourdieu provides a clear illustration of this aspect of practice by reexamining the dynamics of gift exchange.⁶⁶ To work effectively, the practice of traditional gift-giving presupposes a "deliberate oversight" of the "fake circulation of fake coin" which makes up symbolic exchange.⁶⁷ What is not seen by those involved is that which objective analysis takes to be the whole explanation of the exchange, namely, a reciprocal swapping of items with no intrinsic value. Misrecognition is what "enables the gift or counter-gift to be seen and experienced as an inaugural act of generosity."⁶⁸ What is experienced in gift-giving is the voluntary, irreversible, delayed, and strategic play of gift and counter-gift; it is the experience of these dimensions that actually establishes the value of the objects

and the gestures. The context of practice, Bourdieu stresses, is never clear cut but full of indeterminacy, ambiguities, and equivocations. Hence, 'theoretical reconstruction,' as a description in terms of general laws, removes the very conditions that afford misrecognition and the social efficacy of gift exchange. By abstracting the act from its temporal situation and reducing its convoluted strategies to a set of reversible structures, theoretical analysis misses the real dynamics of practice.⁶⁹

A fourth characteristic of practice, closely intertwined with the features situationality, strategy, and misrecognition, has to do with the motivational dynamics of agency, the will to act, which is also integral to the context of action. It addresses the question of why people do something or anything, but in a form that attempts to avoid the reductionism of most self-interest theory. This dimension of practice can be evoked through the concept of 'redemptive hegemony,' which is a synthesis of Kenelm Burridge's notion of the "redemptive process" and Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony."⁷⁰

The term hegemony has been used to go beyond more traditional understandings of power and social process, specifically, that ruling power is expressed in direct techniques of coercion, that culture is the 'whole social process,' and that ideology is a system of false meanings expressing the interests of particular classes.⁷¹ Gramsci's term recognizes the dominance and subordination that exist within people's practical and un-self-conscious awareness of the world. It is a term that politicizes our understanding of what David Laitin calls "the symbolic framework that reigns as common-sense."⁷² This awareness is a lived system of meanings, a more or less unified moral order, which is confirmed and nuanced in experience to construct a person's sense of reality and identity. As such, this practical awareness of the world is a lived ordering of power, a construal of power that is also, inevitably, a misconstrual since it is power as envisioned and encountered in very particular situations. A lived 'ordering' of power means that hegemony is neither singular nor monolithic; to be at all it must be reproduced, renewed, and even resisted in an enormous variety of practices. Similar to Burridge's concept of the redemptive process, Laitin sees hegemony not only as a lived consciousness and moral order, but also as a prestige order.⁷³

Burridge's notion of a redemptive process as the basis of cultural life provides a useful framework for bringing into focus the actual workings of this notion of hegemonic power. Burridge defines the redemptive process as that process by which, in a given context of assumptions about power, persons "attempt to discharge their obligations in relation to the moral imperatives of the community."⁷⁴ This redemptive process, he suggests, not only involves assumptions about power and the moral order; it appears to enable people both "to perceive the truth of things" and to be guaranteed that "they are indeed perceiving the truth of things."⁷⁵ An insight basic to Burridge's formulation is the idea that people construe power relations in such a way that (1) these power relations are reproduced in various ways, (2) people have a sense of their place in some ordering of relations, and (3) they can envision the efficacy of acting within that ordering of relations. People reproduce relationships of power and domination, but not in a direct, automatic, or mechanistic way; rather, they reproduce them through their particular construal of those relations, a construal that affords the actor the sense of a sphere of action, however minimal.

As a practical construal or consciousness of the system of power relations and as a framework for action, redemptive hegemony suggests that human practice is characterized by relations of dominance and subjugation. These relations, however, are present in practice by means of the practical values, obligations, and persistent envisioning—as both an assumption and an extension of the system—of a state of prestige within this ordering of power. This vision exists as a practical consciousness of the world (common sense) and a sense of one's options for social action. It is also a vision of empowerment that is rooted in the actor's perceptions and experiences of the organization of power. Although awkward, the term 'redemptive hegemony' denotes the way in which reality is experienced as a natural weave of constraint and possibility, the fabric of day-to-day dispositions and decisions experienced as a field for strategic action. Rather than an embracing ideological vision of the whole, it conveys a biased, nuanced rendering of the ordering of power so as to facilitate the envisioning of personal empowerment through activity in the perceived system. The truism that "every established order tends to produce . . . the naturalization of its own arbitrariness" indicates a process in which agents not only accede

to a shared sense of reality but also effectively reproduce that reality in ways that continue to empower them to act.⁷⁶

Gramsci proposed that hegemonic ordering of power requires people both to envision and to suppress, to self-censor and to establish dominance not merely through overt mechanisms of control but through a climate of thought to which the oppressed classes subscribe. This theory of ideology suggests what has been called a general "strategy of containment."⁷⁷ It also implies what others have made explicit, that ideology is not a disseminated body of ideas but the way in which people live the relationships between themselves and their world, a type of necessary illusion.⁷⁸ To maintain and adapt their assumptions about the order of reality persons and groups engage in degrees of self-censorship or misrecognition, as well as legitimization and objectification in the guise of more stable social structures.

In sum, a redemptive hegemony is not an explicit ideology or a single and bounded *doxa* that defines a culture's sense of reality. It is a strategic and practical orientation for acting, a framework possible only insofar as it is embedded in the act itself. As such, of course, the redemptive hegemony of practice does not reflect reality more or less effectively; it creates it more or less effectively. To analyze practice in terms of its vision of redemptive hegemony is, therefore, to formulate the unexpressed assumptions that constitute the actor's strategic understanding of the place, purpose, and trajectory of the act.

Although tailored to the needs of this inquiry into ritual, the concept of redemptive hegemony is akin to several other theories of practical activity. David Cannadine and Simon Price imply a similar notion when they ask how activity projects images of cosmic order on to the plane of human experience.⁷⁹ Leach's idea that "social structure in practical situations (as contrasted with the sociologist's abstract model) consists of a set of ideas about the distribution of power between persons and groups of persons" also bears on the discussion here.⁸⁰ Similarly, when Geertz argues that any understanding of the Balinese *negara* would have to elaborate not just structures of action or thought but a poetics of power as opposed to a mechanics of power, he also implies a strategic sense of the ordering of power.⁸¹

Jameson stresses the interaction of misrecognition and something like redemptive hegemony in his description of the method underlying hermeneutical analysis of cultural objects as socially symbolic acts.⁸² Such analysis, he argues, must first undertake the essentially "negative" hermeneutical task of unmasking or demystifying the ways in which a cultural artifact fulfills a specific ideological mission, namely, its resolution of real contradictions in disguised forms. Yet that alone will not suffice. Hermeneutical analysis must also undertake the second, "positive" task of determining how that artifact simultaneously projected a type of Utopian power by symbolically affirming a specific historical and class form of collective unity.⁸³

Althusser's analytical method gives particular attention to the third feature, the strategic blindness of practice. In his determination the fundamental principle of action is the "problematic" (*problématique*).⁸⁴ The problematic is essentially the cultural-historical limits within which practices operate—that is, within which practices address the particular problems posed for them (for the superstructure, the dominant ideology) by the historical moment (or the infrastructure).⁸⁵ As such, Althusser's problematic may be compared to (but not equated with) Bourdieu's habitus, described as the set of structured and structuring dispositions in dialectical interaction with the conditions in which these dispositions are operating (the latter being the particular state of the habitus at any one moment).⁸⁶ However, Althusser's term also suggests an implicit notion of redemptive hegemony with its description of the 'lived' ordering of power which actors see themselves addressing or countering, but which is reproduced in a transformed way in their actions.

According to Althusser, to understand a set of practices it is necessary to question the relationship of those practices to their intent or object.⁸⁷ In looking at someone doing something, for example, we should ask about the relationship between 'the doing' and 'the something.' This is to question the particular object of the practice as well as the particularity of the practice's relationship to this object. In Althusser's words, one puts to practice the question of the specific difference between itself and its "object-intent." That is, with regard to the unity of the practice with its object-intent, one asks what distinguishes this particular unity from the unity of

other practices and their object-intent. This is to question the 'object-unity' of a particular action.⁸⁸

There are really two 'questionings' involved in this inquiry into the unity of practice and its intent. The first questioning asks what the practice 'sees,' that is, its conscious 'given,' the questions it asks or situations it addresses, its objective or avowed purpose—in other words, the 'something' in 'doing something.' The second questioning, which Althusser calls "symptomatic," is different.⁸⁹ It questions not the 'something' of 'doing something,' but the 'doing.' Althusser argues that to question the 'doing' is to question the "oversights" of a practice, what a specific practice does not see, what it cannot see—namely, the problem or situation that "is only visible in so far as it is invisible."⁹⁰ A practice does not see itself do what it actually does. This oversight does not concern the object-intent consciously sighted by the practice but the very ability to see practice itself.

In simpler terms, we can say that practice sees what it intends to accomplish, but it does not see the strategies it uses to produce what it actually does accomplish, a new situation. Althusser shows that practice will give an answer to a question that was never posed: the effectiveness of practice is *not* the resolution of the problematic to which it addresses itself but a complete change in the terms of the problematic, a change it does not see itself make.⁹¹

To understand how there can be an oversight in the act of sight-
ing, or an 'undoing' in the act of doing, it is necessary to reorganize our traditional concept of knowledge and its "mirror myths of immediate vision" and think of knowledge also as practice or production. Practice sees the problem it is intent upon; it does not see what it itself produces in the very operation of practice: it does not see the production process which constitutes the 'object.' For example, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, ritual theory, a form of practice, does not see how it creates its own object, 'ritual,' in the very course of determining a method appropriate to some object thought to exist independently of theory, method, and discourse. Practice "does not see what it does: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained by default in this new answer."⁹²

Practice, continues Althusser, sees itself as generated by a prob-

lematic, but it produces a new problematic without knowing it, usually convinced indeed that it is still on the terrain of the old one. "Its blindness and its 'oversight' lie in this misunderstanding, between what it produces and what it sees, in this 'substitution,' which Marx elsewhere calls a 'play on words' (Wortspiel) that is necessarily impenetrable to its author."⁹³ Why is practice blind to what it produces? Because it is still fixed on the old question, the old horizon, on which the new problem is not visible. Furthermore, he points out, "what is at stake in the production of this new problem contained *unwittingly* in the new answer is not a particular new object which has emerged among other, already identified objects, like an unexpected guest at a family reunion; on the contrary, what has happened involves a transformation of the *entire* terrain and its *entire* horizon, which are the background against which the new problem is produced."⁹⁴ Just as Bourdieu sees practice as the continual production of a new state of the habitus which generates new practices in turn, so Althusser sees practice as the constant production of a new problematic out of an old one.⁹⁵

Ritual necessarily shares these four features of practice. More to the point, the practical logic by which ritual acts are generated vis-à-vis other ways of acting, ritualization, will be more visible in terms of these four features.

Ritualization

The term 'ritualization' has some pertinent history that needs to be reviewed. Two main schools employ the term: the first has developed from the work of Gluckman; the second is more or less linked to the ethnological perspective pioneered by Huxley. Nearly forty years ago, Gluckman contrasted the "ritualization" of social relationships with "ritualism" in order to extend the notion of ritual beyond a narrow and somewhat traditional connection with organized religious institutions and formal worship.⁹⁶ His work inspired a great deal of sociological literature on ritualization in nonreligious frameworks, such as Murray Edelman's study of ritualization in the political conflicts attending industry-labor union negotiations. Edelman refines the notion of ritualization to describe a process to which a conflicted relationship is subjected in order to

facilitate both the escalation *and* resolution of a struggle that otherwise would destroy the relationship.⁹⁷

In the second school, Huxley's use of the term has also served to extend the traditional notion of ritual. Through his influence, ritualization has been adopted both by those who explicitly acknowledge the relevancy of ethnology for the study of human ritual, such as Rappaport, and by those who do not make any such acknowledgments, such as John Beattie.⁹⁸ For others not directly concerned with Gluckman's or Huxley's lines of thinking, the term is used somewhat more simply to emphasize ritual as activity. This is true for Frits Staal's arguments about the meaning of ritual residing in the structure of the act itself. Yet it is also true for Mary C. Bateson, who uses the term to describe both the development of rituals on the one hand and a particular mode of action on the other. In the latter sense Bateson argues against the effectiveness of a delimited category of action called "ritual," as I did earlier, pointing out that ritualization is a "more-or-less phenomenon" that should be compared to other types of social interactions in terms of "texture," not "structure."⁹⁹

Ritualization is now frequently the preferred term particularly for studies focusing on ritual in technologically advanced societies. Eric Hobsbawm speaks of ritualization to describe the process of "inventing traditions" in modern societies.¹⁰⁰ Crystal Lane's analysis of the development of modern Soviet ritual explicitly adopts the term from Gluckman's work to denote the acting out of social relationships in ritual form in order to express and alter them.¹⁰¹ Common to most of these perspectives is an appreciation of the emergence of ritual forms for the purpose of social control and/or social communication. Ritual forms of behavior are seen to control by defining, modeling, and communicating social relations.¹⁰² Hence, these studies call attention to the conscious or unconscious deployment of ritual as a type of social strategy. Indeed, for most studies that use the term, ritualization is seen to involve the formal 'modeling' of valued relationships so as to promote legitimation and internalization of those relations and their values.

My use of the term 'ritualization' will build on some of these implications while attempting to focus more clearly on (1) how ritualization as practice distinguishes itself from other practices and (2) what it accomplishes in doing so.

Semiotically speaking, just as a sign or a text derives its significance by virtue of its relationship to other signs and texts, basic to ritualization is the inherent significance it derives from its interplay and contrast with other practices.¹⁰³ From this viewpoint, there would be little content to any attempt to generate a cross-cultural or universal meaning to ritual.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, this view suggests that the significance of ritual behavior lies not in being an entirely separate way of acting, but in how such activities constitute themselves as different and in contrast to other activities. Even in theoretical analysis, ritual should not be analyzed by being lifted out of the context formed by other ways of acting in a cultural situation. Acting ritually is first and foremost a matter of nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions.

Viewed as practice, ritualization involves the very drawing, in and through the activity itself, of a privileged distinction between ways of acting, specifically between those acts being performed and those being contrasted, mimed, or implicated somehow. That is, intrinsic to ritualization are strategies for differentiating itself—to various degrees and in various ways—from other ways of acting within any particular culture. At a basic level, ritualization is the production of this differentiation. At a more complex level, ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful. Such privileged distinctions may be drawn in a variety of culturally specific ways that render the ritualized acts dominant in status.

For example, distinctions between eating a regular meal and participating in the Christian eucharistic meal are redundantly drawn in every aspect of the ritualized meal, from the type of larger family gathering around the table to the distinctive periodicity of the meal and the insufficiency of the food for physical nourishment. It is important to note that the features of formality, fixity, and repetition are not intrinsic to this ritualization or to ritual in general. Theoretically, ritualization of the meal could employ a different set of strategies to differentiate it from conventional eating, such as holding the meal only once in a person's lifetime or with too much food for normal nourishment. The choice of strategies would depend in part on which ones could most effectively render the meal symbolically dominant to its conventional counterparts. The choice would also depend on the particular 'work' the ritualized acts aimed

to accomplish in a situation. Given this analysis, ritualization could involve the exact repetition of a centuries-old tradition or deliberately radical innovation and improvisation, as in certain forms of liturgical experimentation or performance art.

An even simpler example might contrast the routine activity of buying some regularly used article of clothing for a spouse or child (such as gym socks) and the ritualized version of buying a similar but different article (argyle socks) and giving it as a gift. These activities are differentiated in the very doing and derive their significance from the contrast implicitly set up between them. Routine giving plays off ritualized giving and vice versa; they define each other. The Christian mass and the gift are not models for a normal meal or family shopping; they are strategic versions of them. Yet this is not to say that ritualization is simply acting differently. Otherwise, buying mismatched socks at a bargain table—an act that may communicate simply insofar as it differs from a routine set of expectations—would qualify as ritual.

This foregoing elaboration of the basic principle of privileged differentiation expressed in what and how something is done is not the sole characteristic of ritual action. I regard it as basic here for how it highlights a fundamental strategic and contextual quality of ritual action. By virtue of this quality, what is ritual is always contingent, provisional, and defined by difference.

From the perspective of ritualization the categories of sacred and profane appear in a different light. Ritualization appreciates how sacred and profane activities are differentiated in the performing of them, and thus how ritualization gives rise to (or creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane.¹⁰⁵ Whereas Durkheim defined religion and ritual as that which is addressed to the sacred, the approach presented here is an inverse of his, showing how a particular way of acting draws the type of flexible distinctions that yield notions and categories like 'ritual' or 'religion.' The relative clarity and flexibility of the boundaries, of course, are also a highly strategic matter in a particular cultural community and are best understood in terms of the concrete situation.¹⁰⁶

There is little explicit consensus concerning the intrinsic features of ritual, and some do not believe there to be *any* features intrinsic to ritual.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, certain features—formality, fixity, and

repetition—have been consistently and repeatedly cited as central to ritual and ritualization. Almost all theorists of ritual start with one or more of these obvious physical characteristics and attempt to link it to any of a variety of authoritative or communicative functions also ascribed to ritual. Formality as a matter of embellishment or repetition as a matter of redundancy has each been defined in turn as central to the communicative functions of ritual. Rituals come to be defined as a particularly intensive form of communication by virtue of their formality and repetition.¹⁰⁸ Fixity of the times and places of ritual activities, as well as the exact gestures to be enacted, also tends to be linked to the authoritative modeling of ritual.¹⁰⁹

Yet if ritual is interpreted in terms of practice, it becomes clear that formality, fixity, and repetition are not intrinsic qualities of ritual so much as they are a frequent, but not universal strategy for producing ritualized acts. That is to say, formalizing a gathering, following a fixed agenda and repeating that activity at periodic intervals, and so on, reveal potential strategies of ritualization because these ways of acting are the means by which one group of activities is set off as distinct and privileged vis-à-vis other activities. Yet in a different situation, informality might be stressed to dominate other ways of acting. For example, the formal activities of gathering for a Catholic mass distinguish this 'meal' from daily eating activities, but the informality of a mass celebrated in a private home with a folk guitar and kitchen utensils is meant to set up another contrast (the spontaneous authentic celebration versus the formal and inauthentic mass) which the informal service expects to dominate. It is only necessary that the cultural context include some consensus concerning the opposition and relative values of personal sincerity and intimate participation vis-à-vis routinized and impersonal participation.

Since practice is situational and strategic, people engage in ritualization as a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances. Ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit, or "the dead weight of tradition." Indeed, routinization and habituation may be strategies in certain cultural situations, but so might the infrequent yet periodic reproduction of a complex ritual tradition. Similarly, ritualization may maximize or minimize its differentiation from other forms of practice. The degree of differ-

entiation is itself strategic and part of the logic and efficacy of the act. Hence, ritualization can be characterized *in general* only to a rather limited extent since the idiom of its differentiation of acting will be, for the most part, culturally specific.¹¹⁰

Aside from the drawing of a contrast between the ritualized activities that are being performed and other forms of social behavior, another feature is also fundamental to the practice of ritualization *per se*. The strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body, specifically, the interaction of the social body within a symbolically constituted spatial and temporal environment. Essential to ritualization is the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices. Ritualization is embedded within the dynamics of the body defined within a symbolically structured environment. An important corollary to this is the fact that ritualization is a particularly 'mute' form of activity. It is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking.