



Research Article

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What is a rite? Émile Durkheim, a hundred years later¹

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Abstract: This paper is focused on the anthropological concept of ritual, starting from Émile Durkheim's approach in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912). We discuss three different aspects of the Durkheimian perspective on religion and rituals: a) the sacred/profane dichotomy; b) the concept of collective representations - which establishes a substantial continuity between religious and scientific thought; c) a "practical" and performative interpretation of rites as the basis of social bond. During the twentieth century, these aspects have influenced different and sometimes opposing theoretical approaches (including "symbolist" and "neo-intellectualist" theories and Victor Turner's "anthropology of experience"). We briefly review each of them, arguing for the importance of reconsidering them into a unitary perspective, centred on religious phenomena as basically moral experiences and as the language of social relations. In the conclusions, we will show how such unitary approach helps us understand the transformations as well as the continuities of rituality in the individualized and secularized societies of what we call nowadays the Western world.

Keywords: Rituals, Durkheim, anthropological concept of ritual, the sacred/profane dichotomy, rite

Émile Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology, died one hundred years ago in Paris, on November 15, 1917. For many sociologists and anthropologists, he is not a mere historical figure, but also a theoretical point of reference. His thoughts are still relevant in many fields of social theory, particularly in the areas of religious and ritual studies. Starting from Durkheim, this essay addresses the question of defining *rite*, on which this special issue of *Open Information Science* is focused. We discuss Durkheim's influence in the anthropological debate, and argue that his perspective on rite and ritual practices—which feature prominently in his last great work, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912)—can bring order into our comprehension and definition of these terms. Furthermore, it can shed light on the divergent anthropological understandings of ritual practice, which have been developed since the end of the nineteenth century. Our analysis will involve three different aspects of the Durkheimian perspective on religion and rites: a) the sacred/profane dichotomy; b) the concept of collective representations, which establishes a substantial continuity between religious and scientific thought, and; c) the “practical” and performative interpretation of rites understood as the basis for social bond.

During the twentieth century, as we will show in the following pages, these aspects have developed independently of each other and have informed different, and sometimes opposing, theoretical approaches. Offering a systematic review of each of them would require a more in-depth and extensive investigation

¹ This essay is the fruit of a concerted reflection undertaken by the authors, and has been written jointly. Nevertheless, in order to delineate the respective contributions, it should be noted that F. Dei wrote sections 1 and 5, L. D’Orsi sections 2-3-4.

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of the history of anthropological studies, a task that lies outside of the target of this interdisciplinary Special Issue. Rather, we argue for their reconsideration within a unitary framework, centred on religious phenomena intended as, essentially, moral experiences that serve as the glue of social relations. With this in mind, in the following sections we will briefly review these aspects of the Durkheimian theory of ritual practice, arguing that their relational character should be recognized today. We conclude by showing how such unitary approach can help expound the transformations as well as the continuities of ritual phenomena against the backdrop of the processes of individualization and secularization that characterize several contemporary societies.

1 Rites, Routines and Other Practices

The terms *rite* and *ritual* are widely used in human and social sciences and have become common sense in ordinary language. Rather than helping us understand social phenomena, their generic and trivialized use can generate confusion. Particularly, rites and rituals are often conceived in terms of regular sequences and repetitive acts. This characterization captures something important associated with ritual practices: the existence of very precise and formalized prescriptions, often defined in terms of a “tradition”—the implication being that omissions or deviations from a sequence of gestures and verbal formulas, or errors in handling particular objects, can make the whole procedure ineffective or “contaminated”.

Accuracy in a sequence of acts is crucial, but is not enough to alone differentiate a rite from routines, habitual patterns, and technical activities. For example, when we brush our teeth, we are performing a standardized sequence of embodied gestures and movements that are repeated mechanically and occur almost below our consciousness. These actions are certainly not “natural”—as evidenced by the difficulties faced by children from 0 to 6 years in learning them and by their historical and cultural variability. Tooth brushing is a ‘technique of the body’ in Marcel Mauss’ (1936) classical sense; nonetheless, it would be improper to define it a “rite”, unless we understand this expression metaphorically and as a synonym of “repetitive” and “habitual”. At any rate, compared to a genuine rite, these actions lack three crucial characteristics: a public dimension; a “sacred” one, in Durkheim’s words; and a certain degree of solemnity and emotional involvement of the social actors. Tooth brushing, as other *routines*, is strictly private, considered trivial and ordinary, and is not accompanied by a specific sense of the sacred.

Something similar can be said of technical activities, highly formalized and mandatory sequences of gestures regulated by sets of “rules” that intertwine the body (or bodies), tools and matter. Whether we are considering a traditional craftwork or an assembly line, compliance with the rules is essential, and the possibility of skipping even one step can compromise the success of the whole sequence. These analogies often lead to conflating rituals and techniques, interpreting the former as illusory “imitations” of the latter: the distinctive character of rites would consist precisely of their being illusory or ineffective. Along this line of reasoning, ritual practice is identified as a sequence of actions apparently devoid of “real” technical or utilitarian meaning, as if rites were pseudo-technical applications of pseudo-scientific thinking.

This is precisely the interpretative ingenuity of nineteenth-century evolutionist approaches that Durkheim intended to challenge. Yet, Durkheim also postulated that rituals are based on beliefs or bear certain meanings. What distinguishes them would not be a particular **behaviour** that is observable from an external point of view, and is thus objectively different from other kinds of **behaviour**; rather, the peculiarity of these **behaviours** lies in their relations with a socially shared order of meaning. For as Durkheim writes:

The rites can be distinguished from other human practices—for example, moral practices—only by the special nature of their object. Like a rite, a moral rule prescribes ways of behaving to us, but those ways of behaving address objects of a different kind. It is the object of the rite that must be characterized, in order to characterize the rite itself. The special nature of that object is expressed in the belief. Therefore, only after having defined the belief can we define the rite. (1995, 34 [1912]).

Based on this clarification, we can distinguish rites from other practices to which they are often compared, such as ritualized animal **behaviour** and neurotic symptoms in human beings. These examples certainly

differ significantly from each other.

In ethology, ritualization is defined as formalized **behaviour** that, in several species, follows well-defined expressive codes, especially within courtship and intraspecific conflicts. Ethologists call “rituals” certain forms of communicative **behaviour** aimed at controlling conflicts (e.g. competitive but harmless courtship fight; Stephenson 2015, 6-7). Although, in the past, the interpretation of rites in the animal domain has influenced the study of rituality in human societies, we are not in the presence of complex languages and thus cannot speak of “meaning”. Moreover, ritualization in intraspecific relationships, in particular between individuals within the same group, is not reason enough for speaking of rites as having the function of empowering “social relationships” or collective cognitive structures. On the contrary, it is the mere datum of cohabitation that triggers a ritualized behaviour in the single subject (Tomasello 2016).

Neurotic symptoms – as already noted by Freud, who dedicated to this problem his celebrated *Totem and Taboo* (published in 1913, just a year after Durkheim’s masterpiece) – bear a connection with the domain of ritualistic behaviour. In particular, Freud refers to those compulsive micro-actions, consisting of gesture sequences, such as counting, tapping and touching things an odd or even number of times, repeating or avoiding certain gestures or words according to a precise but arbitrary rule, and so on. We can identify such compulsive micro-actions by their lacking proper pragmatic purpose—their “uselessness”, one might say, as opposed to techniques. Moreover, these actions are characterized by deep emotional involvement, typically in the form of anguish or anxiety. Techniques, instead, do not entail affectivity, while for the public rites described by Durkheim emotional participation mostly comprises of positive feelings, what he defined as “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]).

There is indeed a “meaning” behind the symptomatic acts that Freudian psychoanalysis has tried to decode, presupposing a psychic level that dates back to repressed traumatic memories. We can identify other analogies between symptomatic ritualization and magical or religious rites. For example, according to the Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino (1959, 1962, 1977), both function as forms of protection from an existential crisis; the rite works mimicking the threat of the crisis itself, and then solving it according to some tradition. The difference lies in the public dimension of magical and religious rites. In other words, these are forms of social action that involve public codes shared by an entire community: the individual crisis is therefore solved through the reintegration of the subject into her/his group. On the contrary, so-called neurotic rites have an individual and private character and, above all, refer to unshared codes. Rather than responding to the subject’s crisis they accentuate it; they do not reintegrate her/him but contribute to her/him social marginalization and deviance.

Ultimately, formal analogies between rituals – intended as forms of public action – and other types of human or animal behaviour fail to capture the peculiarity of the former. Rather, we should stress the social character of rites on the one hand, and on the other hand their relation to a particular, extra-ordinary order of meanings that lies beyond trivial, everyday existence. This extra-ordinary dimension is precisely what Émile Durkheim defines as “sacred”, the starting point of his analysis of religious phenomena.

2 The Sacred and the Profane

The sacred/profane dichotomy is a basic tenet of Durkheim’s approach to religion. In his view, the sacred is a feature of experience that lies outside of the sphere of the profane, in the same way the social sphere is separated from the individual one: “The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought” (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 34). Such radical discontinuity between the sacred and profane is further delineated in another famous passage:

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 44, italics in the original).

The transition from the sacred to the profane, and vice versa, is possible, but entails a radical metamorphosis. In a Durkheimian perspective, the task of religious rites is that of reinforcing this separation, thus averting the collapse of the sacred into the profane—this is also the function of religious prescriptions and taboos, as well as of predicaments like “purity” and “pollution”, as shown by Mary Douglas (1966).

Durkheim emphasizes this dichotomy as part of his criticism of nineteenth century British anthropology, which supported intellectualist and cognitive interpretations of religion and magic (cf. Stocking 1995). Evolutionist anthropologists such as Tylor (1871) and Frazer (1922), indeed, interpreted rituals as childish and fallacious attempts to explain the world and to exercise control over it. Magic and religion were considered rational in terms of the logical procedures they apply, but mistaken with regard to the achieved results. Famous is James Frazer’s definition—in *The Golden Bough*—of magic as “the bastard sister of science” (Frazer 1922, Ch. 4).

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967), among others, offers a vivid critique of Frazer’s view. He was not interested in elaborating a general anthropological perspective on human culture, but examined Frazer’s work as an example of bad, or wrong, philosophical argumentation. According to Wittgenstein, we cannot reduce the meaning of sophisticated systems of practices and beliefs to analytical mistakes. The mistake, instead, lies in their interpretation, for instance in considering rituals as scientific experiments. His lapidary comment was that Frazer’s explanations “of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves” (Wittgenstein 1967, 131). To avoid reducing religion to the domain of error was also Durkheim’s main goal, pursued by separating the rational grammar of the profane from that of the sacred. One of the question nineteenth-century anthropologists were concerned with—how it is rationally possible to cling to beliefs that are empirically unfounded?—thus changes in nature. However, as in Wittgenstein, so in Durkheim, it appears *per se* naïve because it juxtaposes two distinct and incommensurable dimensions of human experience.

In Durkheim’s view, the sacred/profane dichotomy affects the nature of knowledge as well: while the profane pertains to what is learned through empirical experience, i.e. *a posteriori* knowledge, the sacred is related to *a priori* assumptions. Durkheim thus relativizes and sociologizes the two main gnoseological theories of the history of philosophy—empiricism and rationalism—and reformulates them as different ways of being that can coexist in the individual:

Here are two beings in him: an individual being which has its foundations in the organism and the circle of whose activities is therefore strictly limited, and a social being which represents the highest reality in the intellectual and moral order that we can know by observation—I mean society. (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 15-16).

Indeed, many of Durkheim’s followers have stressed the sacred/profane dichotomy. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, drawing on Durkheim’s criticism of nineteenth century evolutionism, argued that scientific rationality and magical and religious practices are two radically different ways of thinking. Lévy-Bruhl’s *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910) [*How Natives Think*] and *La mentalité primitive* (1922) [*Primitive Mentality*] were influenced by Durkheim’s thought as they tried to explain magical-religious practices as primarily “mystical participations” that cannot be interpreted through Aristotelian logic. Lévy-Bruhl radicalizes the Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane by employing an even sharper division between the domain of rationality (“logical mentality”) and mystical participation (“prelogical mentality”). By stressing the antinomy between magical and scientific mentality, he degrades rituals as *nonsense* is even more categorical than Frazer’s. His notion of “primitive mentality” was conceived in order to advance the comprehension of magical practices. *De facto* it reduces magic and religion to irrational and pre-logical practices steeped in supernatural beliefs, impermeable to experiences and unconcerned with the laws of nature (Lévy-Bruhl 1922). However, this leads Lévy-Bruhl to conclusions radically opposed to those of Durkheim.

In the following decades, Lévy-Bruhl’s approach was consigned to the role of a negative point of reference in other socio-anthropological theories. For example, Bronislaw Malinowski’s theory of magic (1948) explicitly challenged his reductionism. Malinowski’s informants, as well those of other “functionalist” scholars like Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown (1922) and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), were

indigenous people in the flesh, not “imagined ones” like Lévy-Bruhl’s. They showed how the so-called “primitive mind”, rooted in solid common sense and realistically oriented towards nature, is anything but “prelogic”. For Malinowski, the purposes of magic and religion are different from those of science, ~~but they are not irrational~~. Magic and religion are not in contradiction with empirical-technological knowledge. Magic is a “substitutive activity” that, through rituals, helps one cope with the anxieties of the human condition. 

During the “golden age of classical anthropology” (years 1920-1960), Malinowski’s intuitions—combined with Durkheim’s approach—led to the development of the so-called “symbolist” perspective. From this perspective, rituals are chiefly, if not exclusively, “expressive actions” that allow people to publicly express values, feelings, notions, and rules about society and its institutions (Beattie 1966). Once again, the main targets are Tylor and Frazer: their instrumental and cognitive interpretations would neglect the expressive purpose of rites. Rather than scientific speculations or cognitive processes, rituals should be approached as artistic practices, such as a theatre and poetry. In the wake of Durkheim’s pioneer work, the function of religious and magic rituals is explained in terms of their power to express and validate social values.

Most twentieth century anthropologists in some form adopted a “symbolist approach”: Edmund Leach (1976), John Beattie (1966), Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas (1966) to list but a few prominent ones. They saw rituals as powerful, dramatic, and expressive practices through which groups and communities preserve and regenerate values and codes. Examples include those pertaining to lineage and generational hierarchy, social status, political authority, solidarity and conflict. From this perspective, understanding what a rite is entails decoding hidden meanings, inaccessible to the consciousness of the social actors themselves. We can clearly recognize the influence of Durkheim’s sacred/profane division in Malinowski’s (1922, 1948) distinction between two different spheres of human rationality: one pertaining the economic and utilitarian, and one the social. Ultimately rites are understood in terms of their hidden functions and “social rationality”.

3 Magic, Religion, and Science

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995 [1912]) we can also identify another, apparently antithetical, line of thinking, which hypothesizes continuity between religious thought and scientific rationality. This “continuistic” approach emerges in the context of Durkheim’s criticism of Lévy-Bruhl’s dichotomy. In his words, “there is no gulf between the logic of religious thought and the logic of scientific thought. Both are made up of the same essential elements, although these elements are unequally and differently developed” (Durkheim 1995[1912], 240-241). In another passage, while discussing the concept of “imperviousness to experience” in totemic ceremonies, Durkheim writes that:

The periodic failures of the Intichiuma [aboriginal totemic rites] do not shake the confidence the Australian has in his rite, [...] because he holds with all the strength of his soul to those practices he comes to for the purpose of renewing himself periodically. He could not possibly deny them in principle without causing a real upheaval of his entire being, which resists. (1995, 365[1912]).

However, Durkheim does not imply incommensurability of a profane rationality based on experience, and the sacred sphere, embedded in aprioristic principles. Scientific mentality, he argues, differs only in degree. The last quotation continues: “But however great that resistance might be, it does not radically distinguish the religious mentality from the other forms of human mentality, even from those other forms that we are most in the habit of opposing to it. In this regard, the mentality of the savant differs only in degree from the foregoing” (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 365).

Durkheim intends to develop a sociological approach to knowledge, in order to understand how, and to what extent, cultural and social organizations can determine the criteria of rationality. Despite his notable “positivism” approach, what he offers here is a “relativistic” answer, by arguing that even scientists, when confronted with a single anomalous “fact”, do not easily reject a scientific law corroborated by experience.

In subsequent years, this body of reflections was at the centre of the anthropological debate; in

particular, Durkheim's view was adopted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who drew on it to explain why the African Azande cling to the illusions of magical beliefs:

In this web of belief every strand depends on every other strand, and a Zande cannot get outside its meshes because this is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong. (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 194).

However, Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard differ on other issues. Durkheim sorted so-called "primitive" knowledge into "realistic" and "mystical", on the basis of its correspondence with objective reality—the arbiter being Evans-Pritchard himself, through the lenses of his Western common sense. While Evans-Pritchard, following the British functionalism, embraced an empiricist epistemology, Durkheim believed that cognitive categories were rooted in social reality and in what he defined as "collective representations". Collective representations are, so to speak, the interface between the individual and society. In Kantian terms, they are "synthetic a priori judgements"—i.e. beliefs about the world that are not grounded in experience. For Kant, these judgements find their origin in individual "pure" reason and its categories, as forms of "intelligible intuition" and a prerequisite for all possible knowledge. Durkheim was in many ways a faithful Kantian. But in his view, synthetic a priori judgments—or collective representations—are grounded in social relationships rather than in individual minds. In this way, the critique of pure reason leaves room for a sociological understanding of knowledge as rooted in practical forms of collective life.

In the 1960s and 1970s, this problem was central in the debate on rationality and relativism that involved, on the one side, symbolist anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard himself and Edmund Leach, and on the other, "neo-intellectualists" such as Ian C. Jarvie (1984), Ernest Gellner (1976) and Robin Horton (1967; see also Wilson 1970, Hollis-Lules 1982). The latter were influenced by post-empiricist philosophies of science; in particular, the Popperian interpretation of science as a deductive process, based on theory rather than "bare facts". Neo-intellectualists asserted the continuity between grammars of the sacred and theoretical postulates of science, and interpreted rituals not merely as "expressive actions" through which social and moral values are conveyed, but also as "cognitive actions." In disagreement with symbolist anthropologists, they provocatively rehabilitated Tylor and Frazer. However, we can see how the neo-intellectualists' work is also (or perhaps above all) indebted to Durkheim's attempt to "sociologize" the Kantian idea of the knowing subject; that is to say the idea that the subject's rationality is embedded in collective representations, within systems of shared beliefs and practices that pre-exist to individual experience.

Particularly suggestive is Robin Horton's (1967) claim that magic, religion, and science reflect similar cognitive systems, thus positing a hidden structure of things inaccessible to common sense. Neither magic, religion or science are based on empirical experience only, and all offer "secondary theorization." That is, they establish relations of causality that are beyond reach of common sense. Magic and religion speak of spirits, gods and mystical forces; of science of atoms, waves and viruses or of Ego, Es and Super-Ego. However, all presuppose the existence of an invisible order in the world that only those with adequate knowledge (shamans, scientist, psychologists, etc.) can grasp. According to Horton, resorting to witchcraft as an explanation for diseases and misfortunes is not proof of a mystical orientation, but of a search for deep and complex causality (Horton 1967).

Criticism of the symbolist approach objects to the radical dichotomy this establishes between the sacred and the profane, and argues that it is the product of its inability to understand traditional religions in terms of proper theoretical idioms. As a matter of fact, the criteria for distinguishing symbolic behaviour from pragmatic rationality are but the product of anthropologists' secularized and scientific mindset, which does not take into consideration whether believers consider their doctrine to be veritable, or whether magicians consider their ritual to be effective. Gellner (1962) observed sarcastically that for symbolist anthropologists, "symbolic" (i.e. non-cognitive) is all that is not Western, empirical, and common sense. Jarvie and Agassi (1967) argued instead that symbolist interpretations did not misinterpret ritual practices, but rather modern science, which in their naive conception, amounts to the accumulation of empirical data supported by direct evidence.

Moving from the vantage point of a non-positivistic representation of science, the neo-intellectualist approach investigates ritual practice without reducing it to its symbolic and expressive dimensions.

Hence, ritual practices can also express rationality and be seen as purpose-oriented actions that cannot be reduced to entirely fallacious interpretations of reality. Jarvie and Agassi (1967) follow closely Popper's distinction between closed and open systems (based on the principle of falsifiability), and compare the "weak" rationality of rituals with the "strong" rationality of science. Nevertheless, the limit of this debate is that both the opposing positions frame magical-religious rites mainly in intellectual terms, disregarding a crucial aspect of Durkheim's work that we will analyse in the next paragraph.

4 In The Beginning Was The Deed

Durkheim's argument is grafted onto a previous debate among the British anthropological school on the possibility that rites may precede myths. As we have seen, Frazer's intellectualist theory regards rituals as the exercise of intellectual thought, in the same way as techniques are expressions of science. The so-called 'Cambridge Ritualist' school, albeit inspired by Frazer, held the antithetical viewpoint according to which action has priority: ritual practices generate myths and not vice versa. Even before Durkheim, in 1909, Robert R. Marett (1914)—the last great exponent of the British anthropological school—suggested to look for the original and prototypical components of "magical-religious" phenomena in their practice. According to Marett, the "primitives" conceive their religion first through performance and only later through reasoning. In his compelling words: "savage religion is something not so much thought out as danced out" (Marett 1914, xxxi).

William Robertson Smith, the Scottish Old Testament Scholar, was an important influence on Émile Durkheim, through, among other things, his view of religious experience as an emotionally charged part of organised social life. In *The Religion of the Semites* (1889), Robertson Smith had argued that original pre-Biblical religions were totemic, and culminated in great annual sacrificial rites: collective consumptions of totem animals, a sort of "communion" in which every individual established moral and social bonds with the whole group.

Durkheim took a very clear stand within this debate: the experience of ritual action—that is, the bodily experience of inclusion in a community that behaves as a single large organism—is not mediated but primary. This aspect of Durkheim's work had been ignored for a long time, but was again brought attention upon by the Italian sociologists Giolo Fele and Pierpaolo Giglioli (2001), among others. From a Durkheimian perspective, they argue that rites do not merely "express" nor simply "reflect" collective values and social ties, but generate them. For example, when social actors perform gestures in harmony with each other, they create, through a mechanic and performative practice, the very group they are part of. The community does not pre-exist action, but is instead created by a repetition of the same acts. In order for a community to come into being, it is first necessary to perform it collectively. One does not "enter" into a group, intended as an already given entity that only has to be "renewed". We could rather say that, apart from the sequences of gestures that are actually carried out to perform a rite, there is no other social reality.

In other words: "in the beginning was the deed". Originating from Goethe's *Faust* (in German "*Im Anfang war die Tat*"), this sentence is variously taken up by early twentieth century thinkers. For instance, we encounter it in the conclusion of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* to mean the primacy of action over thought in "primitive" cultures. But, above all, it was used by Wittgenstein (1969), in his remarks on the relationship between language and the world: "Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination" (Wittgenstein 1969, §402, 475), or as a practical relationship, grounded in "forms of life" rather than intellectual speculation Durkheim himself, in the conclusion of *Les Formes*, states:

Society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is in action only if the individuals who comprise it are assembled and acting in common. It is through common action that society becomes conscious of and affirms itself; society is above all an active cooperation (1995, 421 [1912]).

For Durkheim, therefore, it is through action that rituals accomplish non-conscious (practical) ends, such as building systems of belief and feelings of belonging (cf. Marshall 2002). In this respect, Fele and Giglioli (2001) advanced a suggestive interpretation of the "positivist" Durkheim as ancestor of a line of

thought—particularly, they believe, of phenomenological leaning. They argue that Durkheim’s intuition of acknowledging a creative dimension to performance can be found also in theoretical orientations that are very distant from a Durkheimian classical approach, such as the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel (1967, 2002). Ethnomethodology, however, has (unfortunately) exercised a minimal influence on anthropology. Durkheim’s insights on collective action were chiefly developed by Victor Turner (1967; 1969; 1986) in his performative theories of ritual, and later within the paradigm of embodiment (cf. Csordas 1990, 1999). The influence of Durkheim’s thought can also be traced in the historical-anthropological studies focused on cultural and public memory. For example, the recognition of the central role played by ritual and symbolic practices in nation-building processes and “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991)—exemplified by the edification of monuments and the performance of public ceremonies—is indebted to Durkheim’s intuition of the entanglement of rituals, collective practices and shared feelings of belonging.

The theoretical approach developed by Victor Turner is especially valuable to the analysis of Durkheim’s work on the efficacy of practice, precisely because Turner utilizes the concept of performance to explore social transformations. In his analysis of rituals among the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner (1967) developed the notions of “liminality” and “social drama.” Liminality derives from the Latin word *limen* (threshold, edge) and is a concept he borrows from Arnold Van Gennep’s work (1909) on the “rites of passage,” those ritual practices through which groups cope with “critical phases” of life and move from one status to another within the social structure (e.g. from youth to adulthood). Liminality is at the heart of the rites of passage, and represents a detachment from the temporal and ethical dimensions of ordinary life. *Limen* is an existential interlude, a socio-cultural limbo characterised by heightened emotional states and a sense of *communitas*, during which people *play* with cultural codes by reassembling them and assigning them new meanings. Thus, social and individual transformations occur through performances that combine familiar symbols in new ways. The concepts of *limen*, “liminal” and “liminoid” are central in the interpretation of rites in contemporary societies.

Similarly, Turner’s “social drama” describes a social dynamic articulated in three stages: order breaking, crisis, and compensation or resolution (Turner 1982). The concluding stage is characterized by public, ritual performances that renew previously broken social ties or intertwine with new ones. In his view, social dramas bring to light what is buried in the depths of cultural life and in normal conditions would remain inaccessible to observation. Thus performance has both an experimental and a critical character, because, through it, we become aware of our own condition and give meaning to our existence. Performance is a “social meta-commentary” (Turner 1986): it helps to comprehend our lived experience through a re-enactment of the experience itself, or an entirely new one.

5 Rites in a Secularized Society: the cult of the individual

In sum, Durkheim’s work advances a theory of rite based on the following three tenets:

- a) Rituals are defined by reference to a non-ordinary domain of experience (the “sacred”), embedded in social and moral bonds;
- b) Rituals are based on collective representations, which in turn reflect the cognitive foundations of both religious and logical/scientific thought (on principle, the two are not in opposition to each other; in other words, science is a social practice no less than religion);
- c) Rituals are not the mere “application” of illusory pseudo-theories, but are rather enacted through actions: their efficacy in shaping moral relationships flows directly from the coordinated gestures of the performers (including bodies and material culture).

These elements of Durkheim’s thought have been subsequently developed in conflicting directions within different theoretical approaches; however, we argue, their relational character should be rediscovered as a fertile ground for the study of ritual practice. Such rediscovery is, anyway, a challenging endeavour in contemporary societies. The theoretical architecture of *Les Formes* rests mainly on ethnographic insights drawn on Australian totemic religions, although there is an argument for the implicit, albeit substantial,

role played by his Jewish education, particularly in the relevance given to community and rituality (Strenski 1997). Whatever the case may be, the ritual practices mentioned by Durkheim bear upon explicit religious frames: an impersonal religion like aboriginal totemism, later evolved into polytheistic and monotheistic religions within which rites generate moral entities that take the form of personalized, sacred subjects.

But how do so-called modern societies function? Are the rites bound to disappear because of contradictory processes of secularization and individualization? Many of Durkheim's contemporaries believed so, having embraced the idea that secularization would be the ineluctable fate of modern societies. Although in different forms and degrees, the British anthropological school, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Marxism all embraced an evolutionary perspective, according to which religion and its rituals were deemed to belong to a backward phase of human history: according to Tylor and Frazer, religion would have been overtaken by science. Several Marxist schools regarded it as an ideology at the service of the ruling classes, the "opium of the people", which would have disappeared in a society without classes. Freud's work on religion was entitled, significantly, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). He viewed religion as projection of the subject's father complex, a condition that humankind would have overcome in its "adulthood". The widespread assumption was that humankind would have left behind religion, conceived as a set of backward beliefs, and entered a more rational era.

Durkheim's position was substantially different. He conceived religion to concern the construction of a moral community; therefore modernity could not make it obsolete. Of course, secularization brings about also a weakening of religious languages that pertain to supernatural entities or realities, and a "disenchantment of the world," that is the abandonment of traditional beliefs and dogmas as well as the loosening of rules governing individual life. However, these transformations do not make rites *per se* less important. Secular rites still embody moral transcendence and support a kind of "civil religion" (Bellah 1967). In this respect, Durkheim writes in the conclusion to *Les Formes* that:

There is something eternal in religion that is destined to outlive the succession of particular symbols in which religious thought has clothed itself. There can be no society that does not experience the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and its distinct individuality. This moral remaking can be achieved only through meetings, assemblies, and congregations in which the individuals, pressing close to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments. (Durkheim, 1995, 429 [1912]).

Thus, "individuals pressing close to one another": rituals are performed through the coordination of bodies, whose physical dimension generates shared feelings, and not vice versa. Durkheim continues his argumentation as follows: "What basic difference is there between Christians' celebrating the principal dates of Christ's life, Jews' celebrating the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a citizens' meeting commemorating the advent of a new moral charter or some other great event of national life?" (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 429). Thus, secular rites do not differ in nature from openly religious ones. What Durkheim has here in mind is the rituality of modern nation-states and, in particular, the national celebrations and festivals instituted during the French Revolution.

However, he is also aware of how difficult it is to replace old rituals with new ones: rituals cannot be simply the outcome of arbitrary decisions, disconnected from the texture of social life itself; rather they must be connected to social life itself. He experienced "some difficulty imagining what the feasts and ceremonies of the future will be," because the world was "going through a period of transition and moral mediocrity" in which old values had lost their relevance to people ("the former gods are growing old or dying") and new ones had not yet been established, "and others have not been born" (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 429). This same analysis may be extended to *our* times, a century later.

Nonetheless, the picture is even more intricate, since the collective nature of practices, in which bodies press against each other, seems to be in contrast with individualization—another feature of modernity. Durkheim is aware that individual existence is assuming autonomy and value, and is freeing itself from the shackles of the community, transiting from mechanical to organic solidarity. In the context of this transformation, the need to establish social bonds through rites is fading, and individualization seems to entail a de-ritualization of social life.

The phenomena Durkheim could see unfold in his lifetime operated on a much bigger scale, and in more radical forms, in the twentieth century, at any level of the social scale. Several social innovations and cultural revolutions were advocated in a polemical spirit against ritualistic formalizations, which were branded as empty, authoritarian, arbitrary and limiting freedom, and individual spontaneity. Unsurprisingly, the expression “merely ritual” is still used to describe something we deem meaningless, obsolete or formulaic.

Religious practice has undergone processes of de-ritualization as well, to the extent that earliest prescriptions (for example those on food, ways of praying, dress, sexuality, etc.) are considered senseless, artificial and opposed to an authentic spiritual life. Nevertheless, from a Durkheimian perspective these processes do not testify to the affirmation of utilitarian and asocial egotism in which no room is left for moral transcendence. On the contrary, modernity has seen the rise of a transcendental “cult of the individual” that goes far beyond the “profane” existence of a single individual. Durkheim (1897) had already identified this aspect in his previous investigation on suicide as a social behaviour, and highlighted the moral repulsion towards an act that, in older societies, was well valued as a sign of individual submission to the state or to another institution:

But today [the individual] has acquired a kind of dignity, which places him above himself as well as above society. So long as his conduct has not caused him to forfeit the title of man, he seems to us to share in some degree that quality *sui generis* ascribed by every religion to its gods which renders them inviolable by everything mortal. He has become tinged with religious value; man has become a god for men. (Durkheim 2002 [1897], 299).

The substance of the matter is that, just as it occurs in moral communities connected to traditional religions, morality based on the individual personality is created and sustained through public ritual. When we achieve this, we can develop a new field of investigation on the condition of rituals in contemporary societies: not only secular but also individualized rites, which, having lost part of their formalized and mandatory nature, but still maintaining an important role in social life, can become an object of investigation. Durkheim did not get the chance to explore this perspective; however, it has been readily taken up in contemporary sociological and anthropological studies.

This is the case with the works of Erving Goffman (1967) who, during the course of his entire career, analysed the micro-rituals of everyday personal interactions—the ways people present and greet themselves, or dispose themselves in relation to others in space, etc.. From Goffman’s perspective, these ordinary micro-rituals are founding moments of a sacralization of the Self, understood here as a moment of moral cohesion of a mass society, which is strongly individualized. Victor Turner has also analysed the dimension of rites in contemporary society. Through the concept of “liminoid”, Turner indicates the nature of practices of leisure that, while lacking an explicit “sacred” dimension, contains some aspects of the liminal condition of more classic rites of passages, and that play a key-role in defining and structuring individual and collective identities. Thus, apparently secularized phenomena, such as tourism or sport, can reveal an unsuspected ritual dimension in the sense that they offer space, time, and a sacred “object” that feed the “transcendent” moral value of the individualized subject. Furthermore, Mary Douglas (Douglas & Isherwood 1979) and Daniel Miller (1998) have analysed the practices of shopping, the consumption of food, and the use of objects in consumer societies as forms of “sacrifice” and “devotion” that, in the same way as Australian Intichiuma rites, give a distinctive form to the categories of logic and culture and define the morality of subjects by nurturing their basic social bonding.

While all these points should be deeply developed, we can offer here only a suggestion. The common point of all these studies is that, like so-called traditional societies, contemporary Western societies are also permeated by rites, even if in less explicit and not as easily recognizable ways. We can argue that the most interesting rites to be studied are precisely those actions that are not explicitly recognized as “ritual” in the awareness of social actors. The progressive loss of relevance of formalization and of mandatory aspects increases further their distance from routines and other social practices, which are outwardly similar but—as we saw in the initial paragraph—are endowed with very different social meanings. The contemporary ritual dimension, secularized and connected to the cult of an individualized Self, becomes fragmented,

widespread and, at times, mixed with everyday and utilitarian practices. There is here certainly the risk of adopting a generalized definition of what a rite is, making its notion useless. In order not to lose our bearings, however, we can still refer to the criteria of recognition Durkheim indicated a century ago: a rite is a practice that creates norms of moral transcendence, crucial for the existence of a society or a community.

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