The Ritual Process

Structure and Anti-Structure

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Communitas: Model and Process

Modalities of Communitas

This chapter springs fairly naturally from a seminar I ran at Cornell University with an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty, on various aspects of what may be called the meta-structural aspects of social relations. I was reared in the orthodox social-structuralist tradition of British anthropology, which, to put a complex argument with crude simplicity, regards a "society" as a system of social positions. Such a system may have a segmentary or a hierarchical structure, or both. What I want to stress here is that the units of social structure are relationships between statuses, roles, and offices. (Here, of course, I am not using "structure" in the sense favored by Lévi-Strauss.) The use of social-structural models has been extremely helpful in clarifying many dark areas of culture and society, but, like other major insights, the structural viewpoint has become in the course of time a fetter and a fetish. Field experience and general reading in the arts and humanities convinced me that the "social" is not identical with the "social-structural." There are other modalities of social relationship.

Beyond the structural lies not only the Hobbesian "war of all against all" but also communitas, a mode of relationship already recognized as such by our seminar. Essentially, communitas is a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals.
These individuals are not segmentalized into roles and statuses but confront one another rather in the manner of Martin Buber's "I and Thou." Along with this direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities, there tends to go a model of society as a homogeneous, unstructured communitas, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species. Communitas is in this respect strikingly different from Durkheimian "solidarity," the force of which depends upon an in-group/out-group contrast. To some extent, communitas is to solidarity as Henri Bergson's "open morality" is to his "closed morality." But the spontaneity and immediacy of communitas—as opposed to the jural-political character of structure—can seldom be maintained for very long. Communitas itself soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between: (1) existential or spontaneous communitas—approximately what the hippies today would call "a happening," and William Blake might have called "the winged moment as it flies" or, later, "mutual forgiveness of each vice"; (2) normative communitas, where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the existential communitas is organized into a perduring social system; and (3) ideological communitas, which is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on existential communitas.

Ideological communitas is at once an attempt to describe the external and visible effects—the outward form, it might be said—of an inward experience of existential communitas, and to spell out the optimal social conditions under which such experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply. Both normative and ideological communitas are already within the domain of structure, and it is the fate of all spontaneous communitas in history to undergo what most people see as a "decline and fall" into structure and law. In religious movements of the communitas type, it is not only the charisma of the leaders that is "routinized" but also the communitas of their first disciples and followers. It is my intention to trace the broad outlines of this widely distributed process with reference to two well-known historical examples: the early Franciscans of medieval Europe, and the Sahajiyās of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century India.

Furthermore, structure tends to be pragmatic and this-worldly; while communitas is often speculative and generates imagery and philosophical ideas. One example of this contrast, to which our seminar gave a great deal of attention, is that kind of normative communitas that characterizes the liminal phase of tribal initiation rites. Here there is usually a great simplification of social structure in the British anthropological sense, accompanied by a rich proliferation of ideological structure, in the form of myths and sacra, in the Lévi-Strauss sense. Rules that abolish minutas of structural differentiation in, for example, the domains of kinship, economics, and political structure liberate the human structural propensity and give it free reign in the cultural realm of myth, ritual, and symbol. It is not tribal initiation, however, but the genesis of religious movements that concerns us here—though both may possibly be said to exhibit a "liminal" character, in that they arise in times of radical social transition, when society itself seems to be moving from one fixed state to another, whether the terminus ad quem is believed to be on earth or in heaven.

In our seminar, also, we frequently came across instances, in religion and literature, in which normative and ideological communitas are symbolized by structurally inferior categories, groups, types, or individuals, ranging from the mother's brother in patrilineal societies, to conquered autochthonous peoples, Tolstoy's peasants, Gandhi's harijans, and the "holy poor" or "God's poor" of medieval Europe. For example, today's hippies, like yesterday's Franciscans, assume the attributes of the structurally inferior in order to achieve communitas.
THE RITUAL PROCESS

IDEOLOGICAL AND SPONTANEOUS COMMUNITAS

The scattered clues and indications we have encountered in pre-literate and preindustrial societies of the existence in their cultures, notably in liminality and structural inferiority, of the egalitarian model we have called normative communitas, become in complex and literate societies, both ancient and modern, a positive torrent of explicitly formulated views on how men may best live together in comradely harmony. Such views may be called, as we have just noted, ideological communitas. In order to convey the wide generality of these formulations of the ideal structureless domain, I would like to adduce, almost at random, evidence from sources far removed from one another in space and time. In these sources, both religious and secular, a fairly regular connection is maintained between liminality, structural inferiority, lowermost status, and structural outsiderhood on the one hand, and, on the other, such universal human values as peace and harmony between all men, fertility, health of mind and body, universal justice, comradeship and brotherhood between all men, the equality before God, the law or the life force of men and women, young and old, and persons of all races and ethnic groups. And of especial importance in all these utopian formulations is the persisting adhesion between equality and absence of property. Take, for example, Gonzalo’s ideal commonwealth in Shakespeare’s Tempest (Act II, Scene 1, lines 141–163), in which Gonzalo addresses the villainous Antonio and Sebastian thus:

Gonzalo:
I’ the commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty
And use of service, none; contract, succession
Bourn, bound of land, tith, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;

No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty;—

Sebastian:
Yet he would be king on’t.

Antonio:
The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.

Gonzalo:
All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour; treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.

Sebastian:
No marrying ’mong his subjects?

Antonio:
None, man; all idle; whores and knaves.

Gonzalo:
I would with such perfection govern, sir,
To excel the golden age.

Gonzalo’s commonwealth has many attributes of communitas. Society is seen as a seamless and structureless whole, rejecting alike status and contract—these evolutionary poles of Sir Henry Maine’s entire system of societal development—eschewing private property, with its bourns and bounds of land, tilth, and vineyard, and relying on nature’s bounty to supply all needs. Here he is, of course, rather meretriciously accommodated by the Caribbean setting; in more spartan circumstances, men would have had to work if only to keep warm. Thus he circumvents the crucial difficulty of all utopias—that they have to produce life’s necessities through work—in economists’ jargon, to mobilize resources. To mobilize resources also means to mobilize people. This implies social organization, with its “ends” and “means” and necessary “deferment of gratifications,” and all these entail the establishment, however transient, of orderly structural relations between man and man. Since, under
these conditions, some must initiate and command, and others must respond and follow, a system for the production and distribution of resources contains within it the seeds of structural segmentation and hierarchy. Gonzalo gets around this awkward fact by assuming an incredible fecundity of nature—and thereby indicating the absurdity of his whole noble dream. Shakespeare also, as he often does, puts valid arguments into the mouths of less than worthy characters when he makes Sebastian say, “Yet he would be king on’t.” Here we may be able to detect the intuition that whenever a perfect equality is assumed in one social dimension, it provokes a perfect inequality in another.

A final communitas value stressed by Gonzalo is that of the innocence and purity of those who live without sovereignty. We have the assumption here, later to be developed most elaborately by Rousseau, of the natural goodness of human beings living in a propertyless, structureless state of absolute equality. Indeed, Gonzalo suggests that among his innocent people there would be no treason, felony, sword, pike, knife, gun—with which he appears to equate the need of any engine, as though war, conflict, or indeed any “politickeing” were necessarily connected with technology, even of the most rudimentary sort.

Gonzalo’s commonwealth cleaves closer than almost any other type of ideological communitas to what Buber (1958, 1961) has called “das Zwischenmenschliche,” or spontaneous communitas. When Buber uses the term “community” he is not, in the first place, talking about persisting social groups with institutionalized structures. He does believe, of course, that such groups can be founded in community, and that some types of groups, like the kvezoth and kibbutzim of Israel, best preserve its spirit. Yet, for Buber, community is quintessentially a mode of relationship between total and concrete persons, between “I” and “Thou.” This relationship is always a “happening,” something that arises in instant mutuality, when each person fully experiences the being of the other. As Buber (1961) puts it: “Only when I have to do with another essentially, that is, in such a way that he is no longer a phenomenon of my I,” but instead is my Thou, do I experience reality of speech with another—in the irrefragable genuineness of mutuality” (p. 72). But Buber does not restrict community to dyadic relationships. He also speaks of an “essential We,” by which he means “a community of several independent persons, who have a self and self-responsibility. . . . The We includes the Thou. Only men who are capable of truly saying Thou to one another can truly say We with one another. . . . No particular kind of group-formation as such can be adduced as an example of the essential We, but in many of them the variety which is favourable to the arising of the We can be seen clearly enough. . . . It is enough to prevent the We arising, or being preserved, if a single man is accepted, who is greedy of power and uses others as a means to his own end, or who craves of importance and makes a show of himself” (pp. 213–214).

In this and other similar formulations, Buber makes it clear that the “essential We” is a transient, if highly potent, mode of relationship between integral persons. To my mind, the “essential We” has a liminal character, since perdurance implies institutionalization and repetition, while community (which roughly equals spontaneous communitas) is always completely unique, and hence socially transient. At times Buber appears to be misled about the feasibility of converting this experience of mutuality into structural forms. Spontaneous communitas can never be adequately expressed in a structural form, but it may arise unpredictably at any time between human beings who are institutionally reckoned or defined as members of any or all kinds of social groupings, or of none. Just as in preliterate society the social and individual developmental cycles are punctuated by more or less prolonged instants of ritualistically guarded and stimulated liminality, each with its core of potential communitas, so the phase structure of social life in complex societies is also punctuated, but without institutionalized provocations and safeguards, by innumerable instants of spontaneous communitas.

In preindustrial and early industrial societies with multiplex social relations, spontaneous communitas appears to be very frequently associated with mystical power and to be regarded as a
charism or grace sent by the deities or ancestors. Nevertheless, by imperative ritual means, attempts are made, mostly in the phases of liminal seclusion, to cause the deities or ancestors to bring this charism of communitas among men. But there is no specific social form that is held to express spontaneous communitas. Rather is it expected best to arise in the intervals between incumencies of social positions and statuses, in what used to be known as “the interstices of the social structure.” In complex industrialized societies, we still find traces in the liturgies of churches and other religious organizations of institutionalized attempts to prepare for the coming of spontaneous communitas. This modality of relationship, however, appears to flourish best in spontaneously liminal situations—phases betwixt and between states where social-structural role-playing is dominant, and especially between status equals.

Some attempts have been made fairly recently in America and Western Europe to re-create the ritual conditions under which spontaneous communitas may be, dare one say it, invoked. The beats and the hippies, by the eclectic and syncretic use of symbols and liturgical actions drawn from the repertoire of many religions, and of “mind-expanding” drugs, “rock” music, and flashing lights, try to establish a “total” communion with one another. This, they hope and believe, will enable them to reach one another through the “dérèglement ordonné de tous les sens,” in tender, silent, cognizant mutuality and in all concreteness. The kind of communitas desired by tribemen in their rites and by hippies in their “happenings” is not the pleasurable and effortless comradship that can arise between friends, coworkers, or professional colleagues any day. What they seek is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared.

The often made etymological homology between the nouns “existence” and “ecstasy” is pertinent here; to exist is to “stand outside”—i.e., to stand outside the totality of structural positions one normally occupies in a social system. To exist is to be in ecstasy. But, for the hippies—as indeed for many millenarian and “enthusiastic” move-ments—the ecstasy of spontaneous communitas is seen as the end of human endeavor. In the religion of preindustrial societies, this state is regarded rather as a means to the end of becoming more fully involved in the rich manifold of structural role-playing. In this there is perhaps a greater wisdom, for human beings are responsible to one another in the supplying of humble needs, such as food, drink, clothing, and the careful teaching of material and social techniques. Such responsibilities imply the careful ordering of human relationships and of man’s knowledge of nature. There is a mystery of mutual distance, what the poet Rilke called “the circumspection of human gesture,” which is just as humanly important as the mystery of intimacy.

Once more we come back to the necessity of seeing man’s social life as a process, or rather as a multiplicity of processes, in which the character of one type of phase—where communitas is paramount—differs deeply, even abyssally, from that of all others. The great human temptation, found most prominently among utopians, is to resist giving up the good and pleasurable qualities of that one phase to make way for what may be the necessary hardships and dangers of the next. Spontaneous communitas is richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones. Life in “structure” is filled with objective difficulties: decisions have to be made, inclinations sacrificed to the wishes and needs of the group, and physical and social obstacles overcome at some personal cost. Spontaneous communitas has something “magical” about it. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power. But this power untransformed cannot readily be applied to the organizational details of social existence. It is no substitute for lucid thought and sustained will. On the other hand, structural action swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of communitas. Wisdom is always to find the appropriate relationship between structure and communitas under the given circumstances of time and place, to accept each modality when it is paramount without rejecting the other, and not to cling to one when its present impetus is spent.
Gonzalo's commonwealth, as Shakespeare appears ironically to indicate, is an Edenic fantasy. Spontaneous communitas is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition. The moment a digging stick is set in the earth, a colt broken in, a pack of wolves defended against, or a human enemy set by his heels, we have the germs of a social structure. This is not merely the set of chains in which men everywhere are, but the very cultural means that preserve the dignity and liberty, as well as the bodily existence, of every man, woman, and child. There may be manifold imperfections in the structural means employed and the ways in which they are used, but, since the beginnings of prehistory, the evidence suggests that such means are what makes man most evidently man. This is not to say that spontaneous communitas is merely "nature." Spontaneous communitas is nature in dialogue with structure, married to it as a woman is married to a man. Together they make up one stream of life, the one affluent supplying power, the other alluvial fertility.

FRANCISCAN POVERTY AND COMMUNITAS

Between Gonzalo's commonwealth and models of closely integrated structural systems lies an abundance of ideal social forms. Attitudes to property distinguish the communitas set of models from the more empirically oriented models, which combine in varying proportions components of the communitas type with a clear recognition of the organizational advantages of institutionalized structures. It is essential to distinguish between the ideal models of communitas presented in literature or proclaimed by founders of movements or actual communities, and the social process that results from enthusiastic attempts by the founder and his followers to live in accordance with these models. It is only by studying social fields, of whatever dominant character, over time, that one can become aware of the illuminating nuances of behavior and decision that throw into light the developmental structure of the relationship between ideal and praxis, existential communitas and normative communitas.