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Anthropology and social theory: Renewing dialogue

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Abstract
This article argues that anthropology may represent untapped perspectives of relevance to social theory. The article starts by critically reviewing how anthropology has come to serve as the 'Other' in various branches of social theory, from Marx and Durkheim to Parsons to Habermas, engaged in a hopeless project of positing 'primitive' or 'traditional' society as the opposite of modernity. In contemporary debates, it is becoming increasingly recognized that social theory needs history, back to the axial age and beyond. The possible role of anthropology in theorizing modernity receives far less attention. That role should go much beyond representing a view from 'below' or a politically correct appreciation of cultural diversity. It involves attention to key theoretical concepts and insights developed by maverick anthropologists like Arnold van Gennep, Marcel Mauss, Victor Turner and Gregory Bateson, concepts that uniquely facilitate an understanding of some of the underlying dynamics of modernity.

Keywords
anthropology, differentiation, imitation, liminality, schismogenesis

Recent years have seen an increasing tendency towards a borrowing of ideas between anthropology/ethnography and sociology/social theory. However, the overall question has still not been posed with sufficient clarity: in what ways exactly can anthropology contribute to social theory? The ethnographic method and the study of power from the margins have become widely popular in the social and political sciences. In recent decades, social theory also came into at least superficial contact with anthropology via the 'cultural turn'. Yet this elevated status of anthropology and its method has involved

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almost no engagement with the theoretical baggage and the history of concept formation within the discipline of anthropology. This article argues that anthropology may represent conceptual and theoretical perspectives of fundamental relevance to social theory, perspectives which have so far remained peripheral to the dialogue between anthropology and social theory.

Discussions concerning the relationship between ethnography and social theory go back more than a century. The Durkheimian School saw the study of modern and 'archaic' cultures as part and parcel of the same project. For most anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropology and sociology intimately belonged together. In 1908, Arnold van Gennep created his own journal (unfortunately quite short-lived) to compete with the Durkheimians, *La Revue des Études Ethnographiques et Sociologiques* (see Thomassen, 2009). Ethnography and sociology were clearly perceived to belong to one and the same field. However, from the 1920s, the disciplines of sociology and anthropology branched off in different directions. Anthropology lost its role as a direct bridge from which to theorize the modern condition. Anthropology and sociology would develop in different directions, and there would be relatively little contact between the two fields. That division, which has since then characterized the academic landscape in both Europe and America, was both institutional (departments were split), epistemic (the disciplines developed very different conceptual vocabularies), and methodological (with the specialization of the anthropological fieldwork tradition). This split was furthered at the general theoretical level by the doctrine of cultural relativism, so dominant in American anthropology taking shape in the early twentieth century. Franz Boas and his followers had become understandably critical of the use of ethnographic data for speculation about origins. Cultures had to be studied in their own right; comparison should be established at the local level and made empirically traceable via direct borrowing and diffusion of cultural traits. This stress on 'cultural particularism' did not lead American anthropologists into disciplinary solipsism. Boas himself engaged in various contemporary debates, such as racism, eugenics, nationalism and criminology. Some of these contributions were summed up in *Anthropology and Modern Life* ([1928] 1962), still a worthwhile read today. The difference was that Boas (and in this he was followed by students like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict) did not bring his analysis to bear on any strong postulates concerning origins or universal functions that could 'explain' modernity: he instead used the variety of ethnographic realities to *question* scientific assumptions concerning 'human nature' and social organization.

In the postwar period, social theory drew much inspiration from anthropological and linguistic theories that came to underpin the structuralist paradigm, through the work of Lévi-Strauss. The inspiration continued most directly via Bourdieu's famous critique of structuralism, partly based on his fieldwork in Algeria, leading to a process approach (Bourdieu, 1977). During the 1960s and 1970s, anthropology had itself been deeply influenced by theoretical currents developed elsewhere in the social sciences, as in psychological approaches and, most importantly, neo-Marxism and world system theory. In the 1980s anthropology went through a long period of self-reflexivity and 'crisis of representation', and in many cases a complete abandonment of the very idea of theorizing. This involved a long and sustained critique of 'classical' or 'traditional'

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anthropology. It also involved a search for inspiration from outside the discipline, which came mostly from (literary) deconstructivism and certain branches of critical theory. The general assumption was that 'traditional anthropology' suffered from a reflexivity deficit, and that post-modern or post-post-modern perspectives therefore spoke from a vantage point from where it was possible to point out methodological and epistemological flaws of 'pre-reflexive' anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

Taken together, these developments largely produced the current configuration, where possible dialogues between anthropology and social theory have been restrained to questions of methodology: anthropology represents a 'view from below' (Ortner, 2006) and a concern with meaning-formation and subjectivity; hence the still more frequent reference to the ethnographic method, and hence the almost ritualistic reference to the work of Geertz. There seems to reign a general consensus across the social sciences that in order to theorize or attempt any kind of generalization, one must look beyond or outside anthropology.

The premise of this article is: (a) that we have been too quick in our dismissal of 'classical anthropology' and its theoretical promise; and (b) that the modern world may indeed not be so unique in *all* its features, and that it therefore cannot simply be studied on its own terms. The argument closely follows the approach developed by Arpad Szakolczai in his attempt to provide social theory with exactly such 'external reference points', via history and anthropology. This was programmatically stated in his 2000 publication, *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, preceded by an article of the same title (1998). In several follow-up publications, Szakolczai (2003, 2008) has repeated the necessity of a reflexive historical sociology to be accompanied by a 'reflexive anthropological sociology': a social theory inspired by anthropological insights. This means, well within a Weberian perspective, that the particularity of the modern project can be rendered visible by stepping temporally and spatially outside modernity: social theory needs history; there can be no theory without history. However, while it is becoming increasingly recognized – indeed, mainstream – that social theory needs history, back to the axial age and beyond, the possible role of anthropology in theorizing modernity seems far less obvious, and in a sense this is a debate which is only starting to emerge. That role goes far beyond simply representing a view from 'below', a politically correct appreciation of cultural diversity, or a taste for the exotic and marginal. It involves, I argue, attention towards key theoretical concepts developed within anthropology that uniquely facilitate a proper understanding of the modern world and some of its underlying dynamics. As will be briefly discussed in the final sections, this includes terms such as liminality and schismogenesis, and also the mythical figure of the trickster, recently developed as an analytical prism for the study of modern, political leadership (Horvath, 2012).

The argument must start with a caveat. In building a bridge from anthropology to social theory, one evidently has to tread very carefully: anthropologists are very cautious about the use of single ethnographic cases for any kind of generalizing and it *is* indeed risky to apply concepts beyond the field of investigation in which they emerge. Anthropologists and historians often provide the raw material for social scientists to theorize with, but they just as often hesitate to accept comparative or theoretical frameworks that go beyond the empirical case. I think one has to understand this caution well, also with a view to the history of *abuse* of anthropology; an abuse that goes back to the foundations

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of social theory. Let me briefly reconstruct that history, before an alternative platform for dialogue is indicated.

Anthropology and social theory: Marx, Durkheim and Freud

As convincingly argued by Faubian (2000), anthropology has constantly been used by social theorists as a construction of alterity, a platform from where to think of 'the Other' of modernity. Such a use of the 'primitive' does of course go back to some very central traditions in European philosophy and thinking – back to the Enlightenment, and back to seventeenth-century contract theory – and its need of the exotic Other as a negative or positive reference point. Anthropology has often served to sustain various incompatible views of the 'human' or of 'human nature', to fantasize about an 'original state' of human affairs or 'state of nature' (Kuper, 1988). Far from belonging only to Hobbes or Rousseau, Romanticism or speculative philosophy, this construction of alterity has been perpetuated within the allegedly most empirical and objective traditions in social theory, including functionalism and Marxism.

The notion of an original primitive society was quite a central foundation for arguments made by Marx and Engels, which relied much on the then existing anthropological speculation on 'origins' that dominated early evolutionism. Anthropological works on primitive peoples stimulated Marx's and Engels' idea of 'primitive communism', a view of an undifferentiated group of people living freely together without centralized power or private property. Engels constructed this view by interpreting the works of Bachofen and Maclennan who both argued that the original mode of collective organization was the 'promiscuous horde'. The works of Henry Lewis Morgan and Herbert Spencer were also important reference points for the articulation of historical materialism and social evolution. Marx planned to write a book on Morgan, but never did so. *Ancient Society* by Morgan was the main inspiration behind Engels' work on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (published in 1884). Engels' analysis was to a very large extent driven by an ethnographic comparison that served to sustain an evolutionist schema of historical progression following certain laws of motion. While Marx was mainly a revolutionary, he believed that the condition of workers and a deeper understanding of capitalist society must be brought to bear on a general scheme of human history (for a fuller discussion, see Bloch, 2004). Here, of course, Marx and Engels, like many of their contemporaries, worked from the critical assumption that the 'primitives' of the contemporary represented the past of humankind. In this projection, the 'primitive' starting point also came to serve as an ideal image of the teleological end station of evolution, e.g. Communism proper. Marx and Engels here simply followed the wider belief that modernity must have somehow developed from its antithesis. The primitives were made to represent everything that moderns were not – an analytical operation which was accompanied by moral condemnation of savage life or romanticized worship, two sides of the same ethnocentric coin. Marx and Engels went mostly in the second direction, combined with a strong belief in progress and perfectionism of the human state. If the Iroquois (studied by Morgan) had organized without a state, then the state itself could more easily be seen as transitory.

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As anthropology slowly started to establish itself as a university discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century, it did so as an extremely ambitious exercise, wishing to both map and explain all cultures within a single theoretical framework. If those ambitions failed with unilineal evolutionism, they were reformulated with early functionalism. The aim of Durkheim and his followers was both to gather all existing data on 'archaic' people but also to use such data to ground a theoretical/comparative view of humankind. Most famously perhaps, Durkheim ([1912] 1967) saw the study of Australian totemism as a short cut to a universal theory of religion; and while he was at it, in his *Introduction* he also used the aborigines to correct Kant's theory of knowledge. The *a priori* which made conceptual thought possible was social reality itself.

In a way very similar to Marx and Engels, Durkheim used the ethnographic material to describe organic solidarity (modernity) via a contrasting device: *they* are like that, *we* are like this; they have none of that (say, division of labor), we have a lot of that, and in higher 'volume'. The picture that emerged of primitive society was once again that of an undifferentiated group of people, an organic whole made up of persons sharing perfectly overlapping norms and values, and trembling together in the same way in front of the totem. This idea was essential for Durkheim's theory of religion, but it also grounded his two main concepts of organic and mechanical solidarity, developed in his thesis, *Division of Labor*.1 Durkheim's ethnographic data (drawing greatly on the works of Spencer) was of an almost equally poor standard as that used by Marx and Engels, despite Mauss' efforts. This was pointed out with great clarity by Arnold van Gennep, Durkheim's most important critic after Gabriel Tarde's death in 1904. In his review of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (*EFRL*, Durkheim, 1995), written in 1913, van Gennep plainly stated that Durkheim's views of 'simple' societies were 'entirely erroneous' (van Gennep, [1913] 2001: 92). Van Gennep also said that Durkheim demonstrated a complete lack of critical stance towards his sources, collected by traders and priests, naïvely accepting their veracity (van Gennep, [1913] 2001: 92). Van Gennep knew the sources, for he had used the same ones for his 1906 book, entitled *Mythes et légendes d'Australie*. According to van Gennep, Durkheim interpreted freely from dubious data, and was pressing the ethnography into a prefabricated theoretical scheme. Durkheim's insistence upon using 'empirical facts' and 'observable social phenomena' for theory building was simply not followed up in his own work.2

It must be stressed that anthropology played a largely similar role in the development of psychology as a science. Here Freud's *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* sits in the same position as *EFRL*: the primitives show in their attitudes and behavior something simple and foundational which in our modern society has been covered with layers of complexity. Freud saw anthropology as a short cut to establishing the universal rules of the deeper psyche. The Aborigines were the perfect primitives for that job as well. To Freud, they performed the role of a child-like state, pure and unmediated, something we could only reach out for in unmediated dreams or, perhaps, emulate in our hidden desires. Freud's visiting room in Vienna was, not coincidentally, full of totems and 'primitive art' depicting sexual objects. The totem pole was for Freud the living proof of the Oedipus complex and the original father-killing, *his* sacrificial version of the origin of religion and culture (for further discussion, see Kuper, 1988: 105–22).

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Parsons and Habermas and the return to primitive undifferentiation

From within the major -isms that developed across the early social sciences – evolutionism, functionalism, Marxism, Freudianism – anthropology remained a foundational starting point for theoretical reflection. From the 1920s, as already indicated, the 'joint enterprise' of anthropology and social theory was largely abandoned as anthropology began to drift away from the grand comparative ambitions that had driven its founders (Faubian, 2000: 245). From the perspective of social theory, the dominant view that would establish itself from the postwar period was that the modern world represented its own unique constellation and therefore had to be studied on its own terms, with little reference to pre-modern or non-modern societies. This produced what Elias (1987) identified as the 'retreat of sociologists into the present'. And so the dialogue between anthropology and social theory nearly died out. At the same time a reference to 'simple' or 'original' society was often smuggled in through the back door by social theorists. The image of the primitive not surprisingly reappeared most visibly in branches of social theory inspired by Durkheimian and/or Marxian approaches. The projects of Parsons and Habermas can be shortly invoked as salient examples of this tendency.

The comparative and universal ambitions of Parsons involved anthropology to much the same extent and in a manner quite similar to Durkheim's project. Parsons aimed to construct an evolutionary scheme of social development and social organization. Parsons' views on 'primitive' societies were certainly more sophisticated than those of Marx or Durkheim, and his Weberian approach precluded him from annulling the role of individual action and meaning-formation. Parsons' views were also inspired by Robert Bellah, whose first degree was in anthropology. Throughout his life, Parsons kept discussing his ideas with leading American anthropologists, and even at his most generalizing, Parsons never argued that all societies would go through the same stages of evolution. All the same, Parsons basically posited primitive society as 'undifferentiated', at the social, cultural and personality levels (Faubian, 2000: 252); and in this way 'it' still served as a starting point of difference, from whence to articulate the unfolding modalities of differentiation that, according to Parsons, had guided social development (Parsons, 1960).

In America, Parsons had a huge impact on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology – and also on their relationship. While wishing to assume all sciences within his own overall scheme of analysis, using them as building blocks in his generalized theory of society, in America, he also managed to separate anthropology from the other social and political sciences in a way very different from what had happened in Europe. In Parsons' view, anthropologists should focus on 'culture', understood as symbols and symbol systems. This separation was announced in a small but important article published in 1958 with Alfred Kroeber, whom Parsons met while at Palo Alto. Kroeber, then 81 years old, was the 'dean of American anthropologists' and had an enormous authority. Kroeber suggested to Parsons they write a joint statement to clarify the distinction between cultural and social systems, which in those days was the subject of endless debates. In October 1958, Parsons and Kroeber published their programmatic statement in a small article in the *American Sociological Review* (Kroeber and Parsons, 1958). It was highly

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influential. Parsons and Kroeber declared that it was important to keep a clear distinction between the two concepts and to avoid a methodology by which the one would be reduced to the other. 'Culture' had nothing whatsoever to do with actual social interaction, which should be left to sociologists.3 From then on, many American anthropologists would focus exclusively on 'cultural systems'. Phenomena such as kinship, religion, state and ideology could all be analyzed as a cultural symbol system, abstract from social interaction. The approach was taken very literally by leading American anthropologists like David Schneider (1968) and Clifford Geertz, and certainly also had some influence on Victor Turner's work after his arrival in the US. This Parsonian/Kroeberian division of labor was very much why the term 'cultural anthropology' was established in America, in contrast to British 'social anthropology', which always kept a focus on observable behavior.

Parsons is not the only famous postwar social theorist who continued to rely on the primitive in his theoretical framework. The tendency can in fact be traced all the way up to the present. The primitive takes centerstage in Habermas' evolutionary narrative of communicative action. In *Theory of Communicative Action* (*TCA*) (1984, 1987), Habermas makes the overall argument that, in modernity, ritual has declined and been replaced by rational discourse. Habermas can make this argument because, following Durkheim, he sees ritual as a primordial, original form of social communication about meanings. However, according to Habermas, it is an 'irrational form', and very limited, because it does not allow for rational deliberation and consensus based on argument. As he says in Volume II of *TCA* '[A] modern observer is struck by the extremely irrational character of ritual practices' (1987: 191). Such irrational pre-modern forms of communication were supported by mythical thinking, which, according to Habermas, was 'illogical'. Mythical thinking, says Habermas, 'confuses internal relations of meaning with external relations among things [and] validity with empirical efficacy' (1987). These illogical and irrational forms are overcome, in Habermas' view, by a historical process of rationalization, which he sees as connected to a certain 'linguistification' of the sacred/ritual forms, whereby bodily forms of behavior are replaced by reflexive, linguistic communication in open discourse.

In Volume 1 of *TCA*, Habermas credits anthropology from Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss for having repeatedly confirmed and corroborated the 'peculiar mythical confusion between nature and culture' (Habermas, 1984: 48; also quoted in Faubian, 2000: 253). Actually, it is a confusion which really *irritates* a modern rational being: 'What irritates us members of a modern lifeworld is that in a mythical interpreted world we cannot ... make certain differentiations that are fundamental to our understandings of the world.'

The primitives cannot differentiate; they confuse the physical environment with the sociocultural environment, and they do not even understand the difference in the first place, for they lack a rational communicative discourse with which to do so. They are both illogical and irrational, which of course to Habermas serves to show just the way in which moderns have become logical and rational. These observations are made in crucial sections of the central arguments of possibly the most read social theory book ever written. Habermas discusses mythical thought from the very beginning, following his initial definition of rationality. What he says about primitive society and mythical thought constitutes the very platform of analysis. How could such claims ever have been

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accepted? Habermas is of course much discussed and critiqued, but Habermas' more than questionable cultural anthropological conjectures are rarely touched upon (for the exception, see Halton, 1994: Chapter 6). This reference to cultural anthropology, says Habermas, allows him to move from conceptual to 'empirical analysis' concerning the nature and evolution of rational reasoning. Which 'mythical people' is Habermas actually talking about, then, empirically speaking? We are mostly left guessing, for Habermas never engages with any ethnographic material directly. Sometimes the ethnographic platform seems to derive from Durkheim's study of totemism (which van Gennep tore apart in his 1913 review and which even Radcliffe-Brown considered untenable; for details, see Thomassen, 2012d). Habermas picks ('for the sake of simplicity', 1984: 44) Godelier and Lévi-Strauss as authoritative representatives of cultural anthropology on the question of primitive mentality. This means, it must be noted, that Habermas accepts an approach where myth and rituals as living forms tend to drown in structural analysis. But it is arguably exactly as *living forms* that myths and rituals are so much *more* than deficient or premature 'reasoning'. And, as even Durkheim argued, it is exactly because of this something 'more' that rituals cannot simply be replaced by 'science' or rational discourse.

Godelier, it should be added, does not represent any neutral reference point in the debate. Godelier largely followed Marx and Engels, approaching mythical thought as human thought that naïvely thinks of reality by analogy: an illusory and inaccurate explanation of things. Via Godelier's work, mythical or primitive thought was brought close to the Marxist notion of false consciousness, which neatly fits Habermas' theoretical construct. It is a more than questionable analytical procedure which Habermas here accepts as veridical (I am not suggesting that Godelier's work on the Baruya should be dismissed *tout court*, far from it). Habermas also refers positively to Malinowski's monograph, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (see 1984: fn p. 414): Malinowski's suggestion that the Trobriand fishermen employ magic when they reach the limit of their rational knowledge spins well with Habermas' evolutionary rationalization theory – but this is one of Malinowski's positions that has been most thoroughly critiqued within the anthropology of religion since it was published in 1922. It is surprising how notions that have been discredited within a discipline can survive and re-blossom for generations elsewhere. Habermas also invokes Evans-Pritchard's famous critique of Lévy-Bruhl, where Lévy-Bruhl's view that the 'primitive mind' and reasoning are qualitatively different from the modern mind is rejected, but where Evans-Pritchard nonetheless manages to uphold a categorical distinction between scientific and unscientific knowledge (where only the former is congruent with objective *facts*). The fact that Lévy-Bruhl *himself* modified his early views on primitive mentality quite radically (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949)4 is bypassed by Habermas – but at least Habermas is here in good company, for the same can be said about most anthropologists.

Lévi-Strauss' work on *The Savage Mind* is another reference point for Habermas. Here it must be said quite plainly that Habermas got it completely wrong. Lévi-Strauss always stressed the universal need to *differentiate* nature from culture, which, according to him, humans do (everywhere) via such diverse activities as myth-making, name-giving and cooking. And contrary to what one might deduce from Habermas' discussion, Godelier's position was here fundamentally *different* from that of Lévi-Strauss, as it was different from Durkheim's. The reader is left with the sensation that Durkheim, Malinowski,

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Evans-Pritchard, Godelier, Winch, Gellner and Lévi-Strauss all said the 'same' thing and that this all adds up to an anthropological 'position' (one that happens to support Habermas' construct, of course); we are also left with the impression that the Nuer, the Trobrianders, the Baruya, the Wangai and the Bororo can all be composed as a 'unit' that reasons along the same lines. This is all quite simply nonsense.

Habermas feels compelled to incorporate primitive society as proof material into his evolutionary narrative of rational discourse. Modern rationality is once again construed as an antithesis to primitive culture, its mirror opposite. Habermas' theoretical construction is argued as being an empirical account based on ethnographic 'data', but in reality it is achieved via a hypothetical procedure, a genuine thought experiment, a series of ad hoc deductions in which the primitives are made to fit as opposites, albeit, of course, with enlightenment granted as an inbuilt human potential for mature rationality. In this sense there is a direct line of descent from Marx, Freud, Durkheim, to Parsons and Habermas. But it is a dead end. And so the rest of our discussion must try to propose a different genealogy in the attempt to build a more plausible bridge from anthropology to social theory.

Other dialogues: anthropologists at the margins

As the above discussion serves to evidence, there are indeed good reasons to be hesitant and careful as we move from anthropology and ethnography to the heart of social theorizing about the modern condition. With the critical review provided so far, I have not wished to downplay the existence of more recent, indeed fruitful debates across anthropology and social theory. For one thing, the use of ethnographically based approaches in the wider social sciences is indeed a real and positive development. Among others, it has led to interesting interplays between anthropology, sociology and social theory in the field of globalization studies. Authors such as Friedman (1994) and Appadurai (1996) productively work through ethnography to make theoretical sense of globalization, and globalization scholars draw much inspiration from such works. Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology (2003) is rooted in his indeed 'deep' reading of Geertz. And it is also an undeniable fact that Bourdieu quite successfully imported anthropological terms such as habitus and practical consciousness into sociology and social theory.

At the same time, however, it must be noted how dialogues between anthropology and social theory have tended to develop within and between the dominant paradigms of the twentieth century: evolutionism, functionalism, structuralism, (post-)Marxism, symbolic interactionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism. While this is not surprising, it does tend to limit the scope of the debate and for a very simple reason: the anthropologists who came up with genuinely novel ideas and concepts were exactly the ones who reacted strongly against those dominant paradigms and whose works cannot be understood within them. This was even the case of Marcel Mauss, the founder of the habitus concept (a fact underplayed even by Bourdieu). Mauss is widely recognized as a crucial figure in anthropology, but he is all too often placed as an in-between figure between Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss, making up a triumvirate defining the 'French anthropological school'. This standard account of the Durkheim/Mauss/Lévi-Strauss trilogy encapsulates Mauss' work in functionalism and structuralism, a decoding which arguably prevents a real engagement with Mauss' work and its relevance for social theory.

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The concepts or ideas alluded to above, namely, liminality, trickster logics, gift-giving, and schismogenesis, were in fact *not* introduced by the most famous or dominant anthropologists. They were ideas sparked from an encounter between a Western observer and a non-Western cultural context, which in a few but significant cases led anthropologists to the conclusion that the language they had been given to think with was limited, if not entirely erroneous. They therefore had to move their analysis outside the dominant intellectual paradigms. These anthropologists all somehow engaged in universalities and made in fact very daring arguments; at the same time –and it is essential to stress this – they went up against any superficial usage of the ethnographic record. They strongly and flatly rejected the idea that all primitive societies were simply 'the same', just as they rejected the idea that members of such societies were without any degree of 'individualism' (this in fact had already been Arnold van Gennep's main charge against Durkheim5) or that they were 'undifferentiated'. In other words, without engaging with the hopeless project of pressing all cultures into preconceived theoretical schemes, categories or evolutionary utopias, they took their analysis to the level of cultural foundations, of shared predicaments of humanity – and this is something quite different. I use the word 'foundations' in conscious distinction from 'origins'. And rather than trying to erect developmental schemes based on substantial features or cultural or mental properties (or lack of these), the comparison they proposed had to do with shared *forms*.

Arnold van Gennep, Marcel Mauss, Gregory Bateson and Victor Turner belong to this category of thinkers. They each in their own way made contributions that we can still tap into and together represent elements of a base from which to build new bridges from anthropology to social theory. Here of course, no exhaustive analysis can be offered. Let me in what remains very briefly introduce some main ideas and concepts of relevance to social theory which might deserve further attention.

Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner and the concept of liminality

One of the potentially most powerful concepts derived from classical anthropology is that of liminality. The term was introduced in van Gennep's most important book, *Rites de Passage*, of 1909 (van Gennep, [1909] 1960). Where Durkheim established *a priori* categories as the units of his taxonomy, van Gennep inferred these units from the structure of the ceremonies themselves. Van Gennep said that all societies use ritual passages to mark transitions; and he also said that such ritual passages had a universal tripartite form. The liminal period is the middle period in such rituals, and it is marked by continuous testing, suffering, taboos, uncertainty and ambivalence, lasting until the stage of reintegration. In contrast to Durkheim's theory of religion, seeing ritual as affirmative of a homogenous society and its social consciousness, van Gennep stressed throughout *The Rites of Passage* how rituals may act simultaneously at the individual and collective levels. Moreover, while neophytes undergo a process of undifferentiation as they are 'annulled' as persons in the separation rituals, ritual passages are clearly also crucial moments for a process of *differentiation*, of age groups, of genders, of status groups, and of *personalities*.

Van Gennep's (1909) book was dismissed by the Durkheimians, and quickly disappeared into total oblivion. However, in 1960, the book was finally translated into English. It was Victor Turner who 're-discovered' the concept of liminality in the summer of

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1963: the concept of liminality complemented his own notion of 'social drama', and helped Turner to develop his own approach, moving completely outside the Durkheimian functionalism and neo-Marxism which were then dominating British anthropology. Turner made liminality the central term for his analysis of Ndembu ritual (1967, 1969), but soon went on to extend his discussion of liminality to a broader, comparative view of ritual and social change (1982, 1985, 1988).

As I have argued elsewhere (Thomassen 2009, 2012b), liminal moments and liminal spaces can be identified at various levels of analysis. Liminal moments can be extended to refer to a wholesale collapse of order or sudden crisis in the most basic representations of the world in larger civilization settings, involving new dynamics between the order-maintaining and order-transforming symbolic forces unfolding within political history. This idea in fact has to do with a little-known dialogue between anthropology and social theory, namely that between Victor Turner and Shmuel Eistenstadt. Eisenstadt's comparative-historical approach to the study of civilizations was greatly influenced by his Weberian reading of the 'symbolic anthropologists' and in particular his collaboration with Victor Turner in the early 1980s, when they jointly organized a seminar on 'Comparative Liminality and Dynamics of Civilizations', leading to a series of publications (see, in particular, Eisenstadt, 1995). Eisenstadt realized that the concept of liminality could re-address the question of change and continuity also in large-scale settings. Indeed, it may be argued that the axial age itself represents, within a large-scale comparative perspective, a kind of liminal period (Thomassen, 2010) betwixt and between two types of world-views and two rounds of empire building, and also a period where certainties and identities are questioned, and when, as Jaspers put it, 'man asks radical questions'. It was very much in the footsteps of this analysis that Arpad Szakolczai diagnosed modernity as a peculiar form of 'permanent liminality' (2000: 220ff).

Liminality is indeed not *any* concept. Liminality does not and cannot 'explain'. In liminality, there is no certainty concerning the outcome. Liminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas and reality itself can be pushed in different directions. But exactly because of this, the concept of liminality has the potential to push social theory in new directions. Liminality may be as central a concept to social theory as both 'structure' and 'practice', as it serves to conceptualize moments where the relationship between structure and agency is not easily resolved or even understood within the by now classical structuration theories. In liminality, the very distinction between structure and agency ceases to make meaning; and yet, in the hyper-reality of agency in liminality, structuration takes place. This also indicates that structure-agency theories themselves need to be temporalized: there are indeed a great deal of situations where structures are as hard as stone, and with extremely reduced roles for individual actors to play; but there are also configurations which provide people with much more room for agency, with novel openings for social change.

Gregory Bateson and the concept of schismogenesis

With the concept of schismogenesis, Gregory Bateson opened up new dialogues between anthropology, psychiatry, politics and sociology, indicating how and why a schism could be produced and reproduced within a single person and his/her self/world relations, but

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also between groups and within larger communication systems, e.g. 'societies' (a word Bateson tended not to use, for reasons much akin those of Tarde). Bateson introduced the concept of schismogenesis in a 1935 article in *Man*, 'Culture Contact and Schismogenesis', followed by a fuller discussion in his monograph on the Iatmul, *Naven* ([1936] 1958). In *Naven*, Bateson identified schismogenesis as a crucial dynamic in Iatmul culture. This book, however, had a very limited audience.6 Its very publication actually served to alienate Bateson from mainstream academic anthropology. This happened very much due to a small, apparently insignificant piece, namely, his 1936 Epilogue. This Epilogue combined, half a century before 'reflexive social science', the conclusion of a piece of research with autobiographical reflections, creating, not surprisingly, a great deal of consternation among its contemporary readers. The Epilogue started by revealing Bateson's utter disorientation at the start of his research, his total failure to understand what was going on in the Iatmul community, and how he was supposed to make sense of it. Such a personal confession rendered him vulnerable, and this was indeed used by his detractors and critics, making him literally an outcast in the academic world. But Bateson not only said that he had no 'guiding idea' for the research ([1936] 1958: 298–9), he questioned very fundamentally the value of the dominant paradigm received by his teachers: 'I did not see – and I still do not see – where orthodox functional analysis would lead' ([1936] 1958).

However, in *Naven*, Bateson's aim was not simply to expose the flawed nature of functionalism or to denounce anthropological science as a hopeless ideal, far from it; he tried, hesitantly and in an honestly searching manner, to develop a different kind of conceptual vocabulary and epistemological footing for doing cultural analysis. It was as a part of this attempt that Bateson developed the schismogenesis concept.

In terms of definitions, Bateson said that schismogenesis is 'A process of differentiation in the norms of individual behavior resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals' ([1936] 1958: 175). Just like van Gennep, Bateson sought to provide an empirically grounded analysis of differentiation processes, rather than assuming an original state of undifferentiation in 'simple' societies. While paying much attention to gender relations and ritualized mockery in his ethnographic analysis of the Iatmul, Bateson clearly indicated how schismogenetic processes could be at work in other spheres of social life. Right from the outset, Bateson was moving the application of the concept beyond the specific cultural context. For Bateson, schismogenesis could become part of any communication system or 'communication relationship' where individuals or groups interact. The behavior of person X affects person Y, and the reaction of person Y to person X's behavior will then affect person X's behavior, which in turn will affect person Y, and so on, potentially leading to a 'vicious circle'. Bateson's schismogenesis theory is indeed about such circles of imitation, unknowingly taking a clearly Tardean approach to social processes. It is part of such circles that the 'system' is somehow 'functioning' although it may produce undesirable effects for everyone involved. That is why Bateson was not afraid to talk about pathologies in communication and in epistemology.

Bateson usefully distinguished between complementary and symmetrical schismogenesis. In the former, two opposite types of behavior reinforce each other in opposite directions: assertive versus submissive behavior between two persons or two groups is the oft-quoted example here. In the latter, the same behavior will lead to more of the

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'same' by the other individual or group – a repetitive system of escalating competition: boasting leading to more boasting is the example invoked by Bateson himself (p. 177). Symmetrical relationships are those in which the two parties are equals, competitors, such as in sports, party politics or wars. Complementary relationships feature an unequal balance, such as dominance–submission (parent–child), or exhibitionism–spectatorship (performer–audience). Both types of schismogenesis can easily lead to extremes and be established as pathological states.

Schismogenesis is certainly one of those rare concepts that cuts across the social, political and human sciences. At the formal level, Bateson recognized similar patterns of communication within wildly different substantive fields of human behavior. In *Naven*, Bateson identified four main areas of application:

1. In intimate relations between pairs of individuals (marriages, for example).
2. In the 'progressive maladjustment of neurotic and prepsychotic individuals' (Bateson was here suggesting that the schismogenetic process can unfold *within* a personality, when the schizoid loses the capability to adjust himself to reality; Bateson would later develop this idea and link it to the notion of 'frames', leading to his famous theory of schizophrenia).
3. In culture contact.
4. In politics.

Bateson ended his short passages on politics by saying that: 'It may be that when the processes of schismogenesis have been studied in other and simpler fields, the conclusions from this study may prove applicable in politics.' Bateson never really followed up on this suggestion – but the project seems more worthwhile than ever. Making his reflections during the inter-war period, and just after the rise to power of Hitler, Bateson indicated the relationship that develops between political leaders, on the one hand, and the officials and people, on the other, as an example of complementary schismogenesis. Bateson called this relationship 'psychopathic': the megalomaniac or paranoid forces of the single person force others to respond to his condition, and so the individual is automatically pushed to more and more maladjustment (Bateson, [1936] 1958: 186).

Trickster logics in the schismatic unfolding of liminal moments

Bateson's concept here supplements Weber's analysis of political leadership, and the notion of charisma (Weber, 2004): some leaders may possess the capacity to 'lift' the collective, but a perverse communication relationship may also lead toward a downward spiral, one that is 'functioning' but lethally. The role of political leadership is particularly crucial at the moment when schismogenetic processes are carried from the inter-societal to the infra-societal realm threatening the internal make-up of a community: 'My purpose in extending the idea of contact to cover the conditions of differentiation inside a single culture is to use our knowledge of these quiescent states to throw light upon the factors which are at work in states of disequilibrium' (Bateson, 1972: 65). These observations tie Bateson's framework to the mythological concept of the 'trickster'.

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In some of his last writings on liminality and social change, Victor Turner took up the work of Bateson. In his important essay, 'The anthropology of performance', Turner argued that Dilthey's different *Weltanschauungen* become visible in the social drama, as factors giving meaning to deeds that may at first seem meaningless (1988: 90). Turner here recast Dilthey's distinction between various types of human world-views as aspects or tendencies that evolve within the ritual structure proper. In his analysis of social drama or 'public liminality', Turner argued that in a crisis situation, 'sides are taken' and 'power resources calculated'. This often leads to a schism into two camps or factions, where 'one will proceed under the ostensible banner of rationality, while the other will manifest in its words and deeds the more romantic qualities of willing and feeling' (p. 91). Turner here invoked political revolutions as particularly salient examples; he also noted that macropolitics is very similar in form to the micropolitics he himself had studied among the Ndembu. This quite simply means that schismogenesis is a process which is particularly prone to unfold in liminal moments, and that it can, under given circumstances, establish itself as lasting form. Turner said that he had noted such a bifurcation in his African fieldwork; in crisis or conflict situations, '*either* there was an overt reconciliation of the conflicting parties, *or* there was social recognition that schism was unavoidable and that the best that could be done was for the dissident party or parties to split off' (Turner, 1988: 104).

As I have recently argued (Thomassen, 2012a), Turner's analysis acutely serves as a framework for understanding human behavior and social change in revolutionary moments; and to some extent this was anticipated by one of Marcel Mauss' almost forgotten contributions to social/political theory, namely his anthropological analysis of the Bolsheviks. In analyzing the Bolshevik Revolution, Mauss made a simple but important point: the revolution was taken over by a small group of persons, who gained the upper hand and 'carried away' the revolution. Mauss' description of the Bolsheviks hits hard. The Bolsheviks often promoted sheer lies, he says, while at the same time demonstrating 'an extraordinary cynicism' ([1924–25] 1992: 169). Mauss reserves his most devastating judgment for the leaders of the 'Revolution': far from being faithful and self-effacing servants of the people, they were '[d]emagogues and adventurers, revelling in their return from exile' (p. 177); 'murky elements [using] the opportunity to accumulate disorders and follies' (p. 171); 'pure adventurers, gunmen experienced in raids on banks and farms in America' (p. 178), having no connection to and no genuine interest in the people, who often 'were not even Russian', thus 'their savage will, still all powerful today, was not encumbered by any love for this immense people' (p. 178). While fancying themselves heirs to the great European revolutionary tradition, they bear no resemblance to Cromwell or Washington, but rather they 'exploit the Russian Revolution, its ideology, or rather they manipulate Russia, its human material, its disproportionate wealth in men and materials'; they are mere 'imitators of the ancient tyrants' (pp. 178–9).

Mauss' analysis can be rendered further analytical precision by invoking the anthropological term 'trickster'. The application of the trickster theme to the analysis of political leadership has been developed by Agnese Horvath (1998, 2012), whose analysis I here follow. The ambivalent features of the trickster can be recognized at the start of any standard trickster tale or legend (see Evans-Pritchard, 1967; Radin, 1972; Hyde, 1998). The trickster is a vagrant who happens to stumble into the village, appearing out of the

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blue. He tries to gain the confidence of villagers by telling tales and cracking jokes, thus by provoking laughter. He is an outsider who has no home and no existential commitments. He is also a mimic. As is clear from almost all mythologies, the trickster has strong affinities with liminal in-between situations. Under normal circumstances, tricksters are jokers that no one takes seriously. In liminality this can change: as an outsider, he might easily be perceived to represent a solution to a crisis. However, having no home, and therefore no real human and existential commitments, the trickster is not really interested in solving the liminal crisis: instead he actually perpetuates schism, confusion and ambivalence, as this is 'his world'. Mauss saw the Bolsheviks in such a light. While they fabricate the lie that they are simple vectors of the people's voice, the Bolsheviks are at the same time not ashamed of flooding the public space with their deeds and (non-)personalities; in spite of all censorship and officially sponsored lies, 'they themselves tell much of the truth about themselves, they have such pride and such an itch for publicity that their official documents amply suffice as testimony against them' ([1924–25] 1992: 169).

The point to make here is as simple as it is important: the so-called 'charismatic leaders' that to such a large extent have shaped the twentieth century were in fact not charismatic at all. Weber (2004) listed a 'matter-of-factness' type of passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion as primary qualities of charisma. He also wrote very explicitly that real charismatic leaders are the ones who do not succumb to vanity and self-glorification and who preserve humbleness and moderation, even as they take on the responsibility of leadership. Political leaders like Mussolini, Mao and Hitler tick *none* of the boxes in Weber's own presentation of charisma. Far from being charismatic and therefore 'gifted', they were rather genuine human failures and outcasts who in highly liminal moments *somehow* captured power.

In moments of radical social or political change, in 'out-of-the-ordinary moments', we see the emergence of charismatic leadership. However, what Weber failed to notice is that in such moments we also see the emergence of a whole series of other sinister figures. Crowd leaders, wrote Le Bon in 1895, 'are especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness' ([1895] 2005: 114). Tricksters are trained in upsetting the social order by reversing values and via their rhetorical and theatrical skills. The trickster is a dangerous clown. The trickster, therefore, is exactly the opposite of a truth-telling prophet or parrhesiast (Foucault, 2006), who in a situation of crisis lays bare the situation, proposes a way out and takes the lead, exposing himself to the danger this entails.

The analysis of the trickster as a type of political leader that may emerge in liminal situations, as proposed by Horvath (2012), may well represent a breakthrough in our understanding of how liminal moments or periods may be carried in dangerous directions (see also Turner, 1985: 230). This conceptual refinement can serve to overcome the both normatively and analytically untenable tradition in the social sciences to list figures as diverse as Gandhi, Jesus, Mussolini and Hitler as belonging to the same category. Both tricksters and charismatic leaders can become originators of social and political movements; but they are different in nature and they lead in very different directions.

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Conclusion

The concepts of liminality, schismogenesis and trickster logics are not just random concepts fished from different corners of anthropology: as argued also by Szakolczai (2009: 153ff), it is when brought together that their full potential becomes clear and relevant to social theory. The tendency for schismogenetic processes to unfold in liminal settings is what, according to Réne Girard, leads to a 'mimetic crisis', which is then solved by the sacrificial mechanism (not surprisingly, Girard read Bateson's monograph on the Iatmul with utmost attention). This becomes all the more disturbing if we accept the suggestion that modernity is itself a particular kind of 'permanent liminality'.

The term 'permanent liminality' is evidently paradoxical: liminality is the absence of enduring structures, so how could it ever become permanent? Yet, Victor Turner had himself introduced the term 'institutionalization of liminality' in reference to monastic orders (1969: 107); and Turner was here, unknowingly, moving his framework close to Weber's analysis of this-worldly asceticism originating in monasticism, in a process whereby the continuous 'testing' of oneself was moved from the monastery into the secular sphere of professional achievement. On that note, modernity cannot be pinned down with reference to any specific institutional or ideational structure, as modernity in its most general refers to change, transition and contingency. In terms of historical semantics, it refers to a temporal experience of the 'present' as having overcome the past, seeing the future as an open horizon (Koselleck, 1979; Wagner, 2001). As Giesen has recently argued (2009), modernity is a continuous transgression of boundaries and the breaking down of traditions, and therefore involves a deep sense of ambivalence.

Such a perspective opens up a re-reading of European history and Western modernity as an institutionalization of liminality and as a continuous unfolding of a series of schisms. Incidentally, Eric Voegelin called the period from the early sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century 'The Great Confusion' (the subtitles given to Volumes IV, 'Renaissance and Reformation', and V, 'Religion and Modernity', of his *History of Political Ideas*); but he also called the same period the age of 'schisms'. The chaos created by the Lutheran schism – and the controversy and revolution that followed – produced a variety of attempts at restoring intellectual order as it became increasingly clear that a restoration of scholastic modes of thought in politics and science could not cope with the situation (Voegelin, 1998: 17–28). But rather than a proper reintegration and return to normality, the configuration that emerged from the middle of the seventeenth century turned contingency into foundation. At the level of epistemology, this involved a specific kind of systematic, institutionalized uncertainty, where, not surprisingly, the faculties of radical doubt and skepticism became the cardinal values of knowledge and science, from Cartesian epistemology to post-structuralist theories of flexible modernity (Thomassen, 2012c).7 At the level of ontology, this relates to the highly problematic idea that homelessness is the condition of being (as posited by twentieth-century existentialist philosophies). Such a perspective also serves to throw light on a fundamental aspect of modern intellectual history, namely, its binary oppositional character, or the process whereby two schools or approaches develop rival positions and keep emphasizing their difference, driving both positions into absurdities and losing contact with the reality they were supposed to explain. Schisms between

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materialism and idealism, between mind and body, between reason and sentiment, between Realism and Idealism, between individual and society or between objective science and critical theory are, from Bateson's perspective, explicable as extremities produced by schismogenetic communication. Finally, as recently argued by Girard, such a reading also captures the clearly mimetic war-prone relationship that developed at the core of modern Europe, particularly visible in the relations between Germany and France from the Napoleonic Wars onwards, escalating into more and more extremes, and eventually leading Europe and the world into total war (Girard, 2011). According to Girard, the end of the Cold War and the onset of the current global age did not signify a move beyond schismatic politics; quite the contrary, it has meant a limitless expansion of mimetic rivalry at both the economic and political levels.

The implosion of liminal conditions is arguably becoming more and more evident in contemporary culture, where 'extreme acts' like sexuality and violence are increasingly trivialized as part of everyday normality and leisure, and where the very boundary between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, between seriousness and play, is systematically becoming more and more porous. Following Bateson and Turner, it should come as no surprise that the full endorsement of the consumption of such liminal products co-exists with attitudes that reject the value of the material world altogether. Such diametrically opposed self/world relations oscillating between world-conquest and world-rejection are, as noted by Weber, recurring phenomena in historical moments of crisis. These are further reasons why we need anthropological tools and concepts to theorize the contemporary.

Notes

1. While Durkheim's binary opposition is often sidelined with Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction, it is worth remembering that even Tönnies found Durkheim's framework over-simplified (Tönnies and Durkheim, 1972).
2. Although it belongs to another discussion, Durkheim's empirical data for his sociology of suicide are in fact equally dubious; see here Tarde's unpublished comments ([1897] 2000). For a comparison of the critiques of Durkheim made by Tarde and van Gennep, see Thomassen (2012d).
3. The division was contained in the definition of culture provided by Kroeber and Parsons:

   "We suggest that it is useful to define the concept *culture* for most usages more narrowly than has been generally the case in the American anthropological tradition, restricting its reference to transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior. On the other hand, we suggest that the term *society* – or more generally, *social system* – be used to designate the specifically relational system of interaction among individuals and collectivities. To speak of a "member of a culture" should be understood as an ellipsis meaning a "member of the society of culture Y." One indication of the independence of the two is the existence of highly organized insect societies with at best a minimal rudimentary component of culture in our present narrower sense".

4. Lévy-Bruhl's position cannot be easily summarized, but it must be noted that he strongly disagreed with the Durkheimian view on primitive 'rationality'. In contrast to Durkheim, however,

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Lévy-Bruhl kept developing his analysis, incorporating critiques, and continuously engaging with the accumulating ethnographic evidence available to him. In his later work, Lévy-Bruhl moved away from his early thesis on the pre-logical mind.

5. Van Gennep always insisted that individuals make choices and affect social situations in *any* kind of society. Van Gennep had made this a very direct critique of Durkheim already in the Introduction to his 1906 publication on Australian religion. Van Gennep argued that Durkheim simplified everything as a 'need of society', a critique he would later repeat in his review of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. For the purposes of his theoretical construct, Durkheim had artificially reduced Australian society to a monocellular organism, devoid of agency. Van Gennep finished off Durkheim with these words: 'Not having a sense of life, that is to say, a biological and ethnographic sense, he turns phenomena and living beings into scientifically dissected plants, as in an herbarium' (van Gennep, [1913] 2001: 94, my translation).
6. The one publication that *did* make the concept of schismogenesis at least *somewhat* known was the 1972 collection of articles by Bateson, published as *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, an edited book containing a reprint of the original 1935 article.
7. One can here refer to the characteristic emphasis placed on skepticism and doubt in the work of Ulrich Beck (1992).

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