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## **Introduction**

Liminality and the Search for Boundaries

Thomassen, Bjørn; Wydra, Harald; Horvath, Agnes

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*Introduction*

## **Liminality and the Search for Boundaries**

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*Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra*

**T**his book concerns comparative applications of the concept of liminality within the social and political sciences. Liminality is a powerful tool of analysis that can be used to explore different problems at the intersection of anthropology and political studies. Social scientists are increasingly sensitive to concepts that advance their ethnographic and historical investigations. Liminality is such a concept—a prism through which to understand transformations in the contemporary world. The objective of this volume is twofold: to explore the methodological range and fertility of an anthropological concept, and to systematically apply this concept to various concrete cases of transformation in social and political environments.

This book illustrates the formative and transformative significance of liminality, presenting some of the most important liminal crises in history, society, and politics. In an ever more interdependent world, globalizing tendencies entail more uniformity and identity within societies and across civilizations. Conversely, the uncertainties created by globalization processes have triggered new divisions and antagonisms. In some cases they spur desperate attempts to recover old certainties; in others, they create new differences. The guiding paradigms of most political and sociological research into these complex processes have been systemic, structural, or normative in nature. Policy makers, public intellectuals, and academics have attempted to “control” or channel crises such as civil wars, terrorist

threats, nationalist mobilizations, ethnic cleansing, and economic downturns along the lines of rationalizing and modernizing discourses. But these formal, institutional, legalistic approaches are quite limited because they bypass people's need to make sense of voids of meaning and challenges to their cultural environment.

The escalation of crises demands a new mode of theorizing of the present. It must provide tools for understanding the combination of cognitive, affective, emotional, and "irrational" dimensions of crisis situations. Whereas contemporary social sciences take the dichotomy between order and disorder for granted, this volume problematizes the emergence and crisis of political forms as historically concrete phenomena. A key theme here is dissolutions of order, where experience shapes political consciousness, interpretive judgments, and meaning formation. This book focuses on the ways in which liminal situations can facilitate understanding of the technologies used to shape identities and institutions. What happens when ignoring the irrationality implicit in liminality makes the technological reconstruction of irrational fragments the very principle of rationality? This book's primary aim is to suggest that seemingly irrational conditions of liminality have logics of their own. Its chapters propose various approaches by which to grasp the technologies and tools that can perpetuate liminal moments into "normal" structures.

The two opening chapters by Arpad Szokolczai and Bjørn Thomassen reconstruct and further discuss the concept of liminality. It was developed in social anthropology, first by Arnold van Gennep and later via the works of Victor Turner, as part of the then emerging "process approach." Originally referring to the ubiquitous rites of passage as a category of cultural experience, liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes. Though this book therefore engages an anthropological concept, it does not try to stay within any singular discipline—quite the contrary, this book is an interdisciplinary and theoretically innovative contribution to social science thinking about boundaries and the liminal spaces between them. The central idea of the book is that liminal conditions of irrationality are situations to be studied in their own right. Lived experience transforms human beings—and the larger social circles in which they partake—cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and therefore significantly contributes to the transmission of ideas and formation of structures.

This book intends to gauge cultural dimensions in contemporary sociopolitical processes, especially through the prism of sudden irruptions of existential crisis in people's lives, loss of meaning, ambivalence, and

disorientation. As a fundamental human experience, liminality transmits cultural practices, codes, rituals, and meanings in-between aggregate structures and uncertain outcomes. As a methodological tool it is well placed to overcome disciplinary boundaries, which often direct attention to specific structures or sectors of society. Its capacity to provide explanatory and interpretative accounts of seemingly unstructured situations provides opportunity to link experience-based and culture-oriented approaches to contemporary political problems, and to undertake comparisons across historical periods. From a perspective of liminality, the cultural dimension of human experience is not an obstacle to a more rational and organized world but could be creative in transforming the social world.

This discussion has general relevance far beyond the specific setting; indeed, a salient theme in each chapter of this book concerns exactly the modalities through which liminal situations under given conditions tend to perpetuate themselves, replacing by some magical act or alchemic trickery (as Horvath discusses it) the very notion of “normality” or “reality” with a fictive “unreal” state, temptingly inviting people into what Turner often talked about as “life in the conditional.” In this vein, many chapters directly or indirectly take up Arpad Szokolczai’s famous diagnosis of modernity as “permanent liminality.” The difficulty of closing a revolutionary period is also an on-the-spot analytical reflection of what is happening in several Arab and Middle East states right now. Those conditions will change, probably before these lines go into print, but analysis of such revolutionary moments will doubtless retain its significance for time to come.

A note about this book’s coming into being is in order. Marking the 100th anniversary of the publication of Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites de Passage* in 1909, the then newly founded journal *International Political Anthropology* produced a special issue on “Liminality and Cultures of Change” (issue 2, volume 1, 2009). Since its publication, that special issue has had quite a remarkable readership and has certainly contributed to cross-disciplinary discussions of liminality during the last five years. We would like to acknowledge the support of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge in preparing and coordinating scholarly contributions on this theme of liminality.

Now we wish to carry forward the effort behind the special issue by turning it into the present book, once again situating our contributions with respect to these ongoing and unfolding debates across the social, cultural, and political sciences. Eight of the chapters offered here are elaborated, updated versions of the original articles in the special issue. Four chapters are new contributions, included because they identify crucial

dimensions of the liminal that speak to our present age and are also, for obvious reasons, becoming core issues within current academic discussions.

The introductory section with chapters by Arpad Szakolczai and Bjørn Thomassen outlines the analytical dimensions involved in “thinking with liminality.” These two chapters also position the concept of liminality within the social sciences with regard to both its almost forgotten intellectual history and its contemporary analytical paradigms and positions. The following two thematic sections engage respectively with social and political dimensions of liminality.

The section “Liminality and the Social” deals with liminality’s applicability for social processes. This section thematizes “inbetweenness,” critical and fluid junctures, the performative elements of culture and power, and the cultural significance of territorial expansion. Bernd Giesen’s chapter “Inbetweenness and Ambivalence” argues that spaces of ambivalence and hybridity are fundamental to sustaining social reality. It suggests that between structuralist and post-structuralist thought lies a third possibility: the space between the opposites, the transition between inside and outside, the “neither . . . nor” or the “as well as . . .”. Cultural sociology focuses on something transcending the successful ordering and splitting the world into neat binaries—namely, an inbetweenness that, it maintains, is essential for the construction of culture. Reality itself provides no firm ground for neat classification, so in applying classifications to raw reality there will always be an unclassifiable remainder. In specifying meaning there is no way to achieve absolute clarity while avoiding a rest of fuzziness.

The chapter by Agnes Horvath proposes a genealogy of alchemy, focusing on the conditions conducive to artificial creation and the practices applied in such a craft. It argues that technology can be analyzed as the proposition, and attempted realization, of a genuinely alchemically transformative operation of gaining a new identity, whether in personal, social, or political being. From the perspective of rites of passage and liminality, together with Plato’s ideas on imitation and image-making, the essay focuses on the situation when a self-styled outsider, the “Trickster,” brings forth this identity change, hijacking the difference-making process.

Michel Dobry’s chapter questions the commonly accepted view that critical events like revolutions and political transitions can or should be approached with a specific set of extraordinary methodological and theoretical tools. Approaches leaning on such a “methodological exceptionalism” often assign a whole different set of values to subjective “choices” made by single individuals in critical historical situations, as compared to “normal” politics, where objective structures tend to be in place. Standard

approaches to critical events also tend to reconstruct a historical path of such events, leading up to the already known outcome. As an alternative, this chapter presents a “hypothesis of continuity” to account for political crises or transitions from a position of “fluid conjunctures.” Dobry’s main proposition is not to provide a phenomenological account of the emotions and aspirations active in such liminal moments, but rather to normalize fluid conjunctures with a view to making their study accessible with social scientific tools. Nevertheless, its stress on fluidity of structures or the “desectorization of social space” illustrates elective affinities with social liminality.

Stephen Mennell reexamines the westward expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century, and the central place the frontier often takes in the American national experience, in the light of the concept of liminality. He tentatively draws connections between liminality, stemming especially from the work of van Gennep and Turner, and the famous “frontier thesis” of another Turner, Frederick Jackson Turner. A further element in the discussion is the idea of decivilizing processes, derived from the writings of Norbert Elias. In conclusion, it argues that the frontier, whether as actual liminal experience or as myth, has had lasting consequences for the American habitus and for the United States’ position in the world.

Peter Burke’s piece stresses the theatrical aspects of identity construction in politics by looking at reconstruction of the everyday life of King Louis XIV at the court of Versailles. Using Erving Goffman’s ideas about the presentation of the self in everyday life, this chapter sheds light on the king’s rapid passages between different royal roles, identities, and styles of performance. This historical anthropology of daily rituals and everyday performances at the margins of the private and the public offers insight into how a rather small man could become an emblematic political leader, *Louis le Grand*.

The final section concerns liminality’s more strictly political dimensions. The contributions focus on various thematic and substantial issues, highlighting the need to examine seemingly chaotic processes of socially intense political transformations in terms of liminality. The chapters thematize revolutionary processes, the liminal sources of the democratic imagination, the challenges of the “cold peace” after the Soviet collapse, and the ways that liminality could become a leading paradigm in a sub-discipline like international relations. Since the special issue appeared in 2009, the world has witnessed a series of revolutions in the “Arab World” that have shattered regimes and broken down existing institutions, paving the way for novelty and radical change. As both Camil Roman and

Mark Peterson argue, political revolutions must be seen as quintessential outbreaks of liminal conditions in a large-scale setting entailing genuine collapse of order and loss of stable reference points.

Roman's chapter focuses on the role of the execution of King Louis XVI during the French Revolution. Though the French revolution is usually seen as overcoming the divine right of kings, the actual execution of the king, the regicide, was not simply an ephemeral event but the centerpiece, the apex of two congruent social processes: the symbolic disincorporation of royal power and the consolidation of a new democratic community of experience. Roman's chapter provides a liminal analysis of the king's trial and execution as well as the creative emotional power emanating from this event.

Mark Peterson carries forward the analysis of revolutions as liminal experience, delving into the detailed, intricate social drama that the Egyptian revolution was and still is. One of Peterson's crucial points concerns the difficulty of "closing" the revolutionary period via some form of ritual reintegration and returning to normality and a certain degree of taken-for-grantedness.

Harald Wydra's chapter takes the question of the authority vacuum in a revolutionary situation a step further. It conceives of democracy as being in dialogue with a condition in which the place of power is empty. In other words, democracy is based on a permanent authority vacuum that, in turn, requires a sacred center of authority to transcend such fractures. Modern democracy has developed bounded spaces—such as territorial states, constitutionalism, or civic collective identity—that check the permanent uncertainty about the place of power. Such bounded spaces and meanings are challenged by the dynamics of political emancipation of individuals and collective groups, which underlies realization of goals of equality and freedom. Contrary to standpoints where democracy is the order of egoism or is an ever stronger appeal to achieve more equality in a global world, this chapter suggests that the democratic imagination is based on the passionate interests in the liminal empty place of power.

Richard Sakwa reflects upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the incapacity to achieve more enduring structures of international peace. He argues that the demise of the Soviet brand of emancipatory revolutionism exhausted the great utopian projects for large-scale social amelioration. The new era, though characterized by an unprecedented openness—a type of liminality of political options designated by the term *krizis*—of historical outcomes, is accompanied by political closure throughout the developed world. Although the lack of political imagination imbues this period with potential for novel types of renewal,

the agendas of the past have not yet been adequately assessed. In particular, the asymmetrical finish of the Cold War, in which one side claims a victory that the other side sees as a common achievement, generates tensions in the form of “cold peace” that are taking traditional geopolitical forms. Thus, even though liminality is defined as a period of transition from one condition to another, the world today is unable to take advantage of the unique historical situation at the end of the Cold War and risks not only perpetuating its structures but also returning the world to a condition of war of all against all, including through consolidation of elite-driven national politics.

Maria Mälksoo’s chapter, covering the analytical challenge liminality poses to the discipline of international relations, crucially opens the discussion of liminality to the larger field of international politics. This addition is both a meaningful and consequential, as we are indeed witnessing a constant “permanentization” of warfare and security threats, with “war”—a large-scale liminal experience par excellence—being everywhere and anywhere, all the time.

## **Into the Liminal and Out Again**

Some final words of caution and guidance: Our title refers to the notion of “breaking boundaries.” Liminality indeed refers to threshold and boundary experiences. Yet we expressly do not argue that “breaking boundaries” is inherently “good” and necessary with respect to either empirical phenomena or epistemology and the premises by which scholars should pursue understanding and reflection. In fact, a guiding theme in many of the chapters here concerns the problematic attitude or “ethos” so bound up with modernity, namely, that boundary transgressing is a necessary, celebrated aspect of any kind of progress. Precisely this attitude should be questioned and problematized—which also means insisting on the importance of boundaries and limits.

This insistence on limits operates in a very concrete dimension. Today the concept of liminality is used in such diverse fields as conflict studies, international relations, literature, business studies, consultancy, psychiatry, education, theater, leisure, arts, and popular culture. We do not want this book to appropriate or delimit the ways in which this concept can or should be employed in analysis. However, we do wish to signal that any meaningful application of liminality needs to pay due attention to the anthropological and experiential underpinning of the term, and that liminality—despite its communitarian and antistructural appeal—simply



cannot be used “freely,” without invoking necessary discriminations and analytical-cum-ethical discernments to ground our arguments. Put briefly, this book does not celebrate liminality but instead problematizes the many ways in which liminal conditions have come to shape the contemporary.

Finally, the twelve chapters of this book do not represent any specific “theoretical paradigm” or -ism, nor do they pretend to. Liminality is not a concept that can or will produce “schools of thought.” The authors represent an array of different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science, history, and international relations. What unifies this volume is a shared engagement with the concept of liminality, and a belief that this concept is indeed central to the social and human sciences, a vital tool for analysis still open to exploration and debate, and still more important for understanding the times in which we all live.