

The Politics of Ritual and the Ritual of Politics: An Introduction

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Twenty years after the publication of Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's famous *The Invention of Tradition*,¹ the Arbeitskreis Deutsche England-Forschung (German Association for the Study of British History and Politics) invited British and German historians to discuss the history of political rituals in Britain. The association's annual conference in 2003, however, did anything but try to assess the legacy of this ground-breaking book and its many stimulating essays. Rather, by placing the volume in the context of other important contributions to the study of social and political history via symbolic communication, performances and rituals, it addressed fundamental questions about how recent trends in historiography help further our knowledge about political processes and structures. How do we integrate traditional approaches to political history with the modern emphasis on ritual and the symbolic? Is it possible to write a history of political rituals?

It is now common-place to describe the development of history as an academic discipline in terms of a "cultural" or "performative turn" that took place at some time in the 1980s and 1990s.² Names like Victor Turner, Benedict Anderson and Clifford Geertz have made it into many undergraduate essays and it is hard to imagine historians and political scientists who doubt the value of detailed empirical studies of the origins, changing meanings, and conflicts hidden behind seemingly "traditional", and therefore unquestionable, aspects of political life. Communities are imagined, collective memories are constructed, traditions and rituals are consciously invented, and gender differences are performed.³ Or are they? Even though the number of publications dealing with rituals, festivities, symbols and memorials has grown rapidly over the last decade, some basic questions about this impressive body of work remain.

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- 1 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1983).
 - 2 Ute Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte. Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter* (Frankfurt 2001); Jürgen Martschukat and Steffen Patzold (eds.): *Geschichtswissenschaft und "performative turn". Ritual, Inszenierung und Performanz vom Mittelalter bis zur Neuzeit* (Cologne 2003); Peter Burke: *What is Cultural History* (Cambridge 2004).
 - 3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd edn.; London 1991); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York 1993); Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich 1992); Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago 1992); Clifford Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme* (Frankfurt 1987), Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago 1969).

Firstly, although many historians now work with approaches derived from the "performative" or "cultural turn", key concepts like "ritual" and "the symbolic" remain remarkably vague, especially when it comes to their meaning for political studies. In his contribution to this volume, Frank O'Gorman deals with the problem in detail, and it would be pointless to repeat his lucid ideas on the topic here. A few remarks may suffice. What exactly constitutes a ritual? To be sure, the repetitive performance of formalised actions, including a certain amount of stereotyping and redundancy is a basic element of the concept, although this general definition may make it difficult to distinguish rituals from daily routines.⁴ Anthropologists try to solve this problem by including a sense of ceremonial action, the interplay between actors and audience, and the transformative power of ritual activity for societies and individuals – leading to Arnold van Gennep's analysis of *Les rites de passages* and Victor Turner's term "liminality".⁵

However, even with restrictions like these, the concept still includes activities surrounding birth, marriage, disease and death of the individual. Nobody would deny that rituals which structure human life and link private with public spheres have important political aspects. Nevertheless, they are not necessarily activities which immediately refer to the general public or society at large. This volume, therefore, emphasises the dimension of power when referring to politics. All essays deal with phenomena connected to the struggles of social groups against public bodies or political opponents, whether at local, urban, or national level. Indeed, in his study of Lord Mayor's Day in nineteenth-century London, Andreas Fahrmeir follows the development of a highly contentious ritual into a relatively harmonious event that was eventually dropped from newspaper coverage. Was it still a political ritual at the end? Even as a unifying community celebration, one might argue, it still had a political message. The crucial question is whether it expressed or questioned power relations. Thus, we understand rituals as political if they centre around the symbolic communication of power.

Secondly, given this definition, how important are political rituals for the study of politics in general? Again, Frank O'Gorman's essay reminds us of the limits of the concept and warns against overstating the insights to be gained by studying rituals. Certain elements of the ritual process itself,

4 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology* (2nd edn.; London 1973).

5 Arnold van Gennep: *Les rites de passage* (Paris 1909); Turner, *Ritual Process*; David I. Kerzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven 1988); Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Performance, Inszenierung, Ritual. Zur Klärung kulturwissenschaftlicher Schlüsselbegriffe', in Martschukat and Patzold (eds.): *Geschichtswissenschaft und "performative turn"*, 33-54. For useful definitions by historians see Peter Borsay, "'All the Town's a Stage': Urban Ritual and Ceremony, 1660-1800', in Peter Clark (ed.), *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600-1800* (London 1984), 228-58; Johannes Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Paderborn 2000).

such as its artificiality and theatricality, might well render the results of ritual studies rather less reliable than more traditional investigations of political conflicts, structures or languages. Though such sceptical caveats are to be welcomed, the authors represented in this volume, including Frank O'Gorman, still hold that rituals are an important element of political culture, and therefore need to be analysed. As so many valuable contributions to the field demonstrate, it now seems impossible to understand the political structures of English towns and cities without taking in the wealth of civic rituals unifying the urban community but also offering a stage for the expression of protest and party political conflicts.⁶ No longer can social movements be studied without due attention to their use of symbols and rituals, whether under their own control or as foci for deliberate attacks and disturbances.⁷ Rituals are central to political conflicts. In many cases they are the only source for historians to analyse identities and political mentalities of social groups lacking other means of expression, especially when bodies without a formal organisation are concerned. As such, the history of political rituals constitutes an element of political history whose neglect comes at a high price.

Thirdly, the abundance of political rituals in Britain after 1700, the period of concern in this volume, makes us wonder whether there is a history to be told that follows their development, and accounts for rises and "inventions" at certain times, decline and stagnation at others? Hobsbawm and Ranger argued that periods of rapid transformation, such as industrialisation, were times when social pressures resulted in a growing demand for the creation of new traditions as well as changes in the meaning and performance of existing rituals.⁸ However, the essays in this volume render the idea of a period of ritual transformation since the early nineteenth century highly problematic. Both Frank O'Gorman and Rosemary Sweet argue that the number and the social impact of rituals in Britain did not increase after 1800. Scholars who deal with the "long eighteenth century" (say 1688 to 1832) just do not seem to find the historical breaks which appear as important turns in the *Invention of Tradition*. Instead, they suggest much longer continuities and a different chronology. O'Gorman's analysis of rituals connected with elections, monarchy, nation, and empire stresses the proliferation of political rituals from the English Revolution until well into the nineteenth century. Similarly, Sweet takes issue with Peter Borsay's verdict on the decline of traditional civic rituals during the

6 See, for example, Borsay, "'All the Town's a Stage'".

7 For exemplary studies of social movements and their rituals see James Epstein, *Radical Expression. Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York 1994); Thomas Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz* (Bonn 2000).

8 See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in eid. (eds.), *Invention of Tradition*, 1-14, at 4-5, and the essays in this volume in general.

eighteenth century.⁹ She questions the whole idea of a fundamental break in the development of rituals between traditional and modern societies, and calls instead for studies of urban rituals which deal with a constant process of change based on local and regional conditions.

While in Sweet's account this process does not necessarily differ in medieval and early modern times, one might perhaps argue that the growth of press coverage and the increase in other forms of published comments on, and descriptions of, rituals in the eighteenth century did constitute a major change. The rising importance of a public sphere divided pre-1700 rituals from ritual activities afterwards.¹⁰ Increasingly, local events reached an audience beyond the actual participants, a change which had important consequences both for the structure of the rituals themselves – now much more open to comparison and critique – and their meanings, which could now be communicated on a national level. Thus the fundamental conflict between attempts to control rituals by organisers or authorities on the one hand, and challenges to their structures and intended meanings by critical participants or hostile opponents on the other, could enter a new era. In addition, the invention of mass media in the twentieth century might be seen as more than just a quantitative change in this development. A detailed analysis of its qualitative effects is beyond the scope of the essays in this volume; nevertheless the general lines of media history suggest fundamental breaks in communication about rituals both around 1700 and from the 1920s onwards with the spread of radio, cinema and television.

However, changes in the means of communication are not specific to Britain. The Victorian obsession with respectability is much more so, and it did have consequences for political rituals in the United Kingdom. Detlev Mares' article follows the debates among radicals about orderly and unruly forms of political expression, most of them connected to ritual and symbolic activities. Demonstrating that scholarly attention to contemporary attitudes towards rituals can be integrated into the writing of the history of a political movement, Mares also suggests that the arguments about respectable political articulation divided different strands of popular radicalism from the 1830s to long after 1850. The demand for respectability left its mark in the 1850s, often seen as a period when the more aggressive forms of working-class politics changed to a mid-Victorian stress on social reform through moral improvement. However, Mares interprets it more as a shift in emphasis than a fundamental change, and demonstrates that a more aggressive and tentatively revolutionary strand of radicalism survived in radical rituals. He is thus in line with many recent studies of radicalism which point to the long continuities within British reform move-

9 Borsay, "All the Town's a Stage", 246-52.

10 For the rise of the public sphere see Andreas Gestrich, *Absolutismus und Öffentlichkeit: Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen 1994); James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge 2001).

ments. However, Mares presents a much more complex picture of its structure than common descriptions of a tamed political left in the 1850s and 1860s suggest.¹¹

If Mares' argument calls for a careful re-examination of the role of respectability in the mid-nineteenth century, Matthias Reiß' contribution leaves no doubt about the importance of respectable forms and the appearance of discipline for social protests in the early twentieth century. His study of the well-ordered hunger marches of unemployed workers in the 1920s and 1930s shows how the self-styling of the protesters as a marching army was central to their attempt to highlight the fate of former soldiers. War heroes turned outsiders invented a ritual that mixed national symbols with the emblems of working-class movements and aspects of religious pilgrimages, and conformed to the social values and moral standards of society in the interwar years. Their choice of ritual expression demonstrates that even on the more radical wing of the working-class movement the increasing demand for respectability in the second half of the nineteenth century had changed the perception of what was acceptable (or promised success) in street action, and what was not. Thus, while a discussion of aspects of respectability might not produce a clear-cut periodisation of political rituals in the late nineteenth century, it certainly highlights fundamental changes in the outlook of British political communication via rituals during this period.

Another central issue that this volume explores is the spatial dimension inherent in ritual. Regardless of considerations of chronology, most political rituals discussed in this volume were informed by a strong sense of space. In the eighteenth century, perambulations by corporations demarcated the physical boundaries of municipal authority, rights and privileges, while most other urban rituals instilled a localized version of civic pride in participants and onlookers, as Rosemary Sweet suggests. The radical and working-class movements of the later period, in turn, made a habit of occupying central spaces in the capital as both Detlev Mares' and Matthias Reiß' essays amply demonstrate. Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square were the routine rallying points for protest marches, symbolising as they did the centre of the social and political nation. The hunger marchers of the interwar years developed this method even further and adopted a star-shaped pattern for their marches, converging on London like enemy armies. Nowhere, however, was the spatial dimension of political ritual more obvious than in the parades of the Orange Order in the last decades of the twentieth century: patrolling their own borders and invading Catholic areas, the marches visually laid claim to political superiority. Yet control of public space is only one aspect of the wider picture; physically unit-

11 Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge 1992); Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class. Labour in British Society 1850-1920* (Manchester 1998).

ing communities is another. The Lord Mayor's Shows as described by Andreas Fahrmeir linked the City of London with the centres of the judiciary in Holborn and the political élite in Westminster and thus integrated different loci of power within the capital. By the same token, the hunger marchers tried to unite the nation in their cause, symbolically binding together the villages and towns through which they processed on their way to the capital.

In this respect the spatial dimension of protest marches, parades, and processions helped to enact identity which has long been regarded as one of the main purposes of ritualistic behaviour.¹² Indeed, several of the contributions to this volume prove the explanatory validity of this particular approach. Especially in the context of civic ritual, notions of social cohesion based on pride in a shared past abound. Sweet's and, to a certain extent, also Fahrmeir's essay leave the reader in no doubt that the rhetoric of long-established privileges, jealously guarded liberties, and civic virtues pervaded urban rituals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A ritualistic culture of memory, however, was not the sole possession of the urban middle classes. Radicalism created its own tradition of hallowed rituals, as did the working-class movement or, for that matter, Unionism in Northern Ireland. In most cases they took shape in a commemorative calendar punctuated either by anniversaries of important events, such as Peterloo, and annual celebrations in honour of their respective founding fathers, or by the 'historic' dates of the marching season in Northern Ireland, recalling William of Orange's victories over the Catholic James II in the 1690s.

Although the capacity of rituals to strengthen national, local, party political, and sectarian identities is beyond doubt, some of the essays in this collection tell a different story which has often been overlooked. Far from being uniformly cohesive, rituals could also prove to be divisive. Detlev Mares's chapter, in particular, challenges facile assumptions about the relationship between symbolic actions and the creation of identity. Instead, he shows that within the radical camp rituals became a bone of contention. Debates about the proper use of ritualistic forms of protest gave way to friction and internal strife in a period of crucial importance for popular radicalism in the early 1870s. Similarly, as Dominic Bryan points out, since the 1960s the parades of the Orange Order in Northern Ireland have developed into sites of political conflict between different strands of Unionism, precipitating the disintegration of the once fairly homogeneous Protestant milieu. Bryan, however, carries his argument even further and suggests that the inability of the British authorities adequately to deal with public rituals played a crucial role in the first stages of the "troubles" in

12 See, for example, Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*; Assmann, *Kulturelles Gedächtnis*; Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'The Transformation of Labour Rituals', in id., *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London 1984), 66-82.

Northern Ireland in the early 1970s: the conflict "was, at first, fought through rituals" (Dominic Bryan). Political rituals, then, could as easily lead to the dissolution of communities as to their unification.

Lastly, this volume also highlights the participatory quality of many rituals in British public life over the last three centuries, which goes a long way towards explaining the enduring appeal of these forms of political expression. Although election and civic rituals in the eighteenth century were socially very narrowly defined, they still involved even those on the fringes of urban society in the making of a mayor or the designation of a MP to a certain, albeit symbolic extent. More importantly, in many instances political rituals provided the only way of participating in the political process in any meaningful sense. They allowed social groups whose other avenues of political engagement had been cut off at least to voice their concerns. Cases in point are radicalism in the early nineteenth century and the unemployed in the years after the First World War, as Detlev Mares' and Matthias Reiß' essays illustrate. While the efforts of radicals were hampered by political repression, the unemployed, for obvious reasons, found it difficult to organise sustained political lobbying. Especially in an age before the full emergence of the mass media, taking to the street proved to be an effective way of raising awareness for one's cause on a national level. Even traditional rituals performed primarily by the political élite and intended to buttress the powers that be could be (ab)used to allow the representation of a wider spectrum of political opinion. The contributions by Frank O'Gorman, Rosemary Sweet, and Andreas Fahrmeir, in particular, give several examples of well-established political rituals which were either hijacked by groups outside the political establishment, such as Jacobites and the followers of John Wilkes, to broadcast their own inflammatory messages, or disrupted by an unruly mob expressing disapproval of political decisions. Ultimately, it was their inherent elements of spontaneity and openness that made political rituals vulnerable to subversive action while also constituting their participatory character.

Issues such as those mentioned above are, of course, not the only ones which deserve to be considered in any study of political rituals in the modern period. There are other worthwhile aspects which, mainly for reasons of space, could not be dealt with in the present volume. One example is religion, which created an important context for ritual in medieval and early modern times, but is hardly discussed with regard to modern manifestations of symbolic behaviour.¹³ However, as the imagery of martyrdom quoted in descriptions of the hunger marchers and the mystical elements in the staging of National Socialist and fascist regimes remind

13 See, for example, John Adamson, 'The Making of the Ancien-Régime Court 1500-1700', in id. (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics, and Culture Under the Ancien Régime 1500-1750* (London 1999), 7-41, at 27-33; Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton 2001).

us, the religious dimension of modern rituals should not be underestimated. After all, ritual developed from religious ceremonies and never entirely lost its transcendental aura. Another obvious lacuna is the discussion of gender. The contributions to this volume provide only glimpses of the involvement of women in political ritual, and if they appear in the narrative they do so only in subordinate roles, as dance partners during election rituals, wives accompanying politicians to the Lord Mayor's Dinner, and the odd participant in Orange Order parades. Although the sources often remain silent on questions of gender further investigations might be in a better position to determine whether ritual up to the twentieth century was indeed primarily a male domain, or whether women played a more substantial role than the essays assembled here seem to suggest.

Despite such caveats, however, the essays in this collection testify to the diverse features that characterise rituals and make them such valuable tools with which to explore political processes in the past. Organised chronologically, they start with Frank O'Gorman's wide-ranging assessment of political ritual in the eighteenth century which also raises fundamental questions about the definition and nature of political ritual in general. A broad perspective is also adopted in Rosemary Sweet's essay surveying the most prominent trends in civic ritual in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The remainder of the volume is devoted to case studies of particular rituals. Andreas Fahrmeir explores the different layers of meaning conveyed by the Lord Mayor's Show in London during the nineteenth century and in doing so rescues the much-maligned Corporation of the City of London from its reputation for backwardness and inefficiency. Detlev Mares analyses disputes within popular radicalism about appropriate forms of political expression, suggesting one reason why political radicalism as a political force to reckon with came to an end in the early 1870s. Matthias Reiß reconstructs the hunger marches of the interwar years, taking issue with the common image of the apathetic unemployed. Finally, Dominik Bryan charts the development of Orange Order parades in the late twentieth century against the background of a decline in the fortunes of this once all-powerful institution. With their different approaches and concerns the individual essays in this volume provide a rich tableau of the state of current thinking on political ritual in the United Kingdom which, it is to be hoped, will stimulate further research in the field.