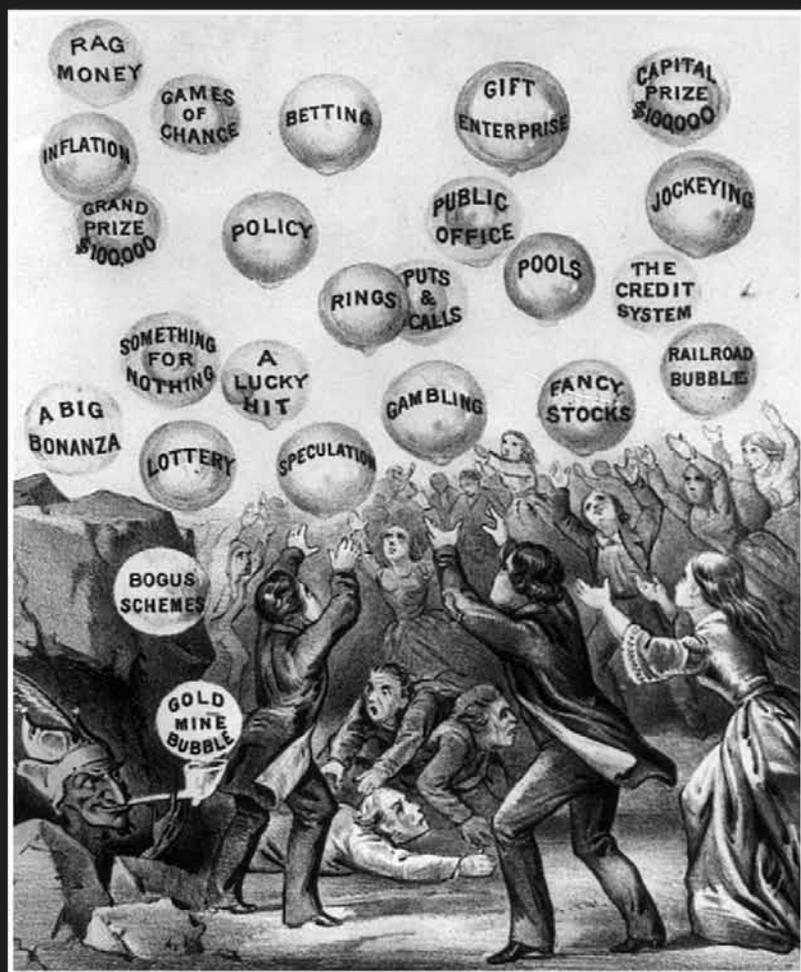


BJØRN THOMASSEN

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ASHGATE

# LIMINALITY AND THE MODERN

Living Through the In-Between



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*To Francesca. For being there.*

# Liminality and the Modern

## Living Through the In-Between

BJØRN THOMASSEN  
*Roskilde University, Denmark*

ASHGATE

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Published by  
Ashgate Publishing Limited  
Wey Court East  
Union Road  
Farnham  
Surrey, GU9 7PT  
England

Ashgate Publishing Company  
110 Cherry Street  
Suite 3-1  
Burlington, VT 05401-3818  
USA

[www.ashgate.com](http://www.ashgate.com)

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

#### **The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:**

Thomassen, Bjørn, (Associate professor)

    Liminality and the modern : living through the in-between / by Bjørn Thomassen.

    pages cm

    Includes bibliographical references and index.

    ISBN 978-1-4094-6080-0 (hardback) -- ISBN 978-1-4094-6081-7 (ebook) -- ISBN 978-1-4724-0467-1 (epub) 1. Liminality. 2. Rites and ceremonies. 3. Gennep, Arnold van, 1873-1957. I. Title.

    BF175.5.L55T46 2014

    302'1--dc23

2014005008

ISBN 9781409460800 (hbk)

ISBN 9781409460817 (ebk – PDF)

ISBN 9781472404671 (ebk – ePUB)

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# Acknowledgements

This book is the outcome of several years of work, some of it going all the way back to my period as PhD researcher at the European University Institute in Florence. The list of people toward whom I owe a profound gratitude is longer than the amount of pages one can possibly include in a short preface. As a PhD researcher I was lucky to learn from a cohort of brilliant teachers and researchers hanging around the old convent at San Domenico di Fiesole. I was privileged to encounter Arpad Szakolczai who was then working intensively on his book *Reflexive Historical Sociology*, the work in which he most explicitly launched the term ‘permanent liminality’ as a diagnostic tool for social theory, and a work which he generously shared and discussed with his students in his class seminars. As the reader will be able to verify, this book is to a very large extent a discussion of Arpad’s work. Thinking back, the situation was in a sense quite comic: I had applied to the doctoral program in Florence because I felt dissatisfied and probably somewhat limited by anthropology as a discipline, at least as I had been taught it, and wanted to move closer to the political and social sciences. In his first lecture on reflexive historical sociology, Arpad lectured for full 45 minutes on Victor Turner, taking me back to anthropology in ways I had not imagined.

In recent years, I have, together with Agnes Horvath and Harald Wydra, been a modest part of a Journal, *International Political Anthropology*, which was launched in 2008. There is very little in this book I would have been capable of writing without their inspiration. Keeping up a journal is hard work, but there can be little doubt that it pays back, in all sorts of ways. Agnes furthermore organized a series of events, seminars and summer schools which always forced me to move ahead. This includes the continuing series of the *International Political Anthropology Summer School (IPASS)*, which every year since 2008 has taken up for discussion a specific theme of contemporary relevance. Chapter 8 in this book, to give just one example, was written quite simply as my attempt to summarize what I had learned myself in the 2009 Summer School. Needless to say I thank each and every participant of those summer schools.

Another series of events that form part of the background inspiration to this book are the yearly symposia on Plato, celebrated, as in the Florentine Renaissance, every November 7, and equally organized by Agnes. Since studying philosophy does not form part of the school curriculum in the country where I grew up, these symposia allowed me to start engaging with philosophy without having to be ashamed about it. Engaging with Plato’s texts, perhaps somewhat naively, and without the filter of any secondary literature, has been eye-opening in ways that continue to surprise me.

The energies that emanated from the Plato workshops also led to the establishment of a series of conferences organized in Ireland, with the priceless work of a lot of people in Cork and Waterford, including Tom Boland, John O'Brien, James Cuffe, Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kühling. The concept of liminality crept up in most of these events, and much of what I write here can be taken back to notes I made while listening to my Irish colleagues and people who made it there.

In 2009, Harald Wydra organized a hugely successful conference at Cambridge on liminality. Thanks to Harald, I forced myself both to engage more thoroughly with the work of Arnold van Gennep and to put somewhat schematically down on paper the way in which one can 'think with liminality' today. The paper I gave at that conference, including all the question marks that still puzzle me, in many ways has functioned as a sketch for this book. There is no doubt that more publications are still to appear from that conference, organized also as an appreciation and anniversary of van Gennep's book on *Rites of Passage*. In dealing with so vast a subject, it was sometimes difficult to keep from being submerged by the materials. Each chapter in this book could easily have served as the single topic for the entire enterprise; and in the future some of them maybe will extend into more detailed studies.

Special thanks also go to all my students in Rome who patiently engaged with some of the ideas expressed in this book, as they were smuggled into my various courses in anthropology, sociology, history, research methodology and political theory. Of my colleagues in Rome I would especially like to thank James Walston, with whom I have been working closely for a decade. His support has been of immense importance; I was sad to have left Rome at a moment where he most needed mine. Simon Martin was always good for a critical remark over a glass of cold beer – and he knows how much I appreciate both (that is, spirited remarks and cold beer). My gratitude extends to many other colleagues at the American University of Rome, including all the brilliant minds and generous souls working within the Department of International Relations. This includes, not least, Isabella Clough-Marinaro. While writing this book, Isabella and I finished another book on Rome, a project equally going back many years, to a conference we organized together in 2005. These two projects – completely different as they are – were sometimes difficult to juggle at the same time, but primarily thanks to Isabella it somehow worked out.

I owe thanks to many other people. Piero Vereni and Valeria Trupiani have been dear friends and conversation partners since always, but they were particularly supportive during some critical moments in the preparation of this manuscript. Christian Karner provided me access to the library in Nottingham in a rush, allowing me to read and copy from the originals of Arnold van Gennep's first published books; Christian also took leadership in a collaborative research project on war and memory in Europe whose preparation has run parallel to the writing of this book. In 2012 I was lucky to meet with Aitzpea Leizaola for the EASA conference in Paris, discovering to my joy that we share the same passion

for Arnold van Gennep; more will come of this, for sure, not least because it ties back to our shared interests in European nationalisms, another area where van Gennep's contributions still await proper appraisal. In past years, I have been lucky to work with Italian historian, Rosario Forlenza. It started during a morning-run along the Arno river, and in a sense we have been running together since. Our joint publications are not to be found among the references here, as they belong to a different field of study (Italian political history); however, Rosario has been with me all along, including in this enterprise. During my last years of residence in Rome I also benefitted from the generous support of Cristiana Panella, who challenged me to think of liminality (and much else!) in ways still to be explored. I am not sure Michael Herzfeld would agree with much of what I argue in this book, but it was immensely inspiring to meet him and his wife, Cornelia, in Rome, joyfully over a dish of freshly made pasta and sparkling white wine. It was Michael and Cornelia who commanded me, in their humbly authoritative way, to start publishing some of the things I, for quite some years, mostly just enjoyed thinking about. They kicked me in the right place, the right moment, the right way.

This book was finished as I moved back to Denmark after having spent half my life abroad, mostly in Italy. In a way it could not be otherwise. Liminality belongs to rites of passage, understood also quite concretely as territorial-emotional crossings of boundaries. As van Gennep discussed so vividly, it concerns those trivial yet crucial activities which shape our lives, such as taking up a new residence, graduating, being received in a church, moving to another country and back-again; it concerns participation in rituals that belong to the human life cycle, from giving-birth and marriage to the end of things, before they start again.

While taking up a new position at Roskilde University, my new colleagues allowed me from day one to launch a new course which focused quite simply on liminality. Their welcoming trust has been much appreciated, and certainly facilitated my transition into the Department of Society and Globalization at Roskilde University. The small group of students who joined me in that Spring 2013 course. 'Liminality: Comparative Perspectives' deserve more thanks than they probably realize. It was due to their helpful suggestions that the chapter structure of this book ended up the way it did. They – and everyone else mentioned here – have a lot of merit, but no responsibility for the content of this book, which is evidently mine.

In my own crossing of thresholds and constant searching for this and that, luckily some people have kept me framed. This includes my near family. It certainly also includes my children, Maria Anaïs and Stella, always reminding me of what really matters. It most definitely also includes the person with whom I have passed the highest number of thresholds and lived through the most important transfiguring moments. That is why this book is dedicated to her.

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# Introduction

## Into Liminality

This book is about the concept of liminality. It may at a first glance seem odd to dedicate a whole book to one single concept. Most books, after all, develop around case studies, thinkers, or larger problem areas. What will be argued in this book, however, is that liminality is not just *any* concept. Liminality refers to moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction. For these reasons, the concept of liminality has the potential to push social and political theory in new directions. Indeed, what this book argues is that liminality must be posited as a *central* concept within the social sciences, in line with our notions of ‘structure’ and ‘practice’. Thinking with liminality serves to conceptualize moments where the relationship between structure and agency is not easily resolved or understood within the by now classical ‘structuration theories’. In liminality, the very distinction between structure and agency ceases to make sense; and yet, in the hyper-reality of liminality, structuration and meaning-formation take form.

Hence, this book is about liminality; it is about how human beings experience and react to change. With an aim to transport the concept of liminality from the ethnographic study of ritual passages in small-scale settings to the heart of social theory of the modern, it is likewise about how larger groups or entire societies undergo change and transition, how they live through the uncertainties of the in-between, and how they come out on the other side of it – if at all.

The qualities pertaining to the concept of liminality are perplexing. On the one hand liminality involves a potentially unlimited freedom from any kind of structure. This sparks creativity and innovation, peaking in transfiguring moments of sublimity. It is far from strange that liminality on this score has been much celebrated in several branches of social and cultural theory since the postmodern turn(s) of the 1980s. On the other hand liminality also involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear, in which sacred symbols are mocked at and ridiculed, in which authority in any form is questioned, taken apart and subverted; in which, as Shakespeare said, ‘degree is shaken’. Human experiences of freedom and anxiety (they do belong together) are condensed in liminal moments. Nothing really matters, and yet, deeply paradoxically, meaning often becomes over-determined.

Such a joint loss of meaning coupled with a continuous threat of centrifugal and centripetal consequences of even the apparently most insignificant word, sign or action can only take place once frames are lost, once signs circulate in a void without stable reference points. The nothing and the endless belong together

(and symbolized by the same number, 0), and the fascination both dimensions have exerted upon the modern mind are in a way well-known (Horvath 2013). Durkheim noted how the notion of the infinite appears ‘only at those times when moral discipline has lost its ascendancy over man’s will. It is the sign of attrition that emerges during periods when the moral system, prevailing for several centuries, is shaken, failing to respond to new conditions of human life, and without any new system yet contrived to replace that which has disappeared’ (Durkheim 2002: 43). In the terminology that we propose here – one that Durkheim certainly would *not* have liked – infinity appears in the horizons of the liminal. Infinity may be a great place to start; it is possibly also the worst place to end.

It is therefore also this fascination with boundless liminality and constant flux that we need to scrutinize. The incitation of constant and instant liminal experience that so characterizes cultural life in our contemporary period easily turns into nullifying boredom, senselessness and normative nihilism. And this we cannot live with, in the long run. The implosion of liminal conditions is becoming still 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. 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-conquering and world-rejection are, as noted by Weber, recurring phenomena in historical moments of crisis.

### **Arnold van Gennep’s Discovery of Liminality and its Contemporary Relevance**

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, rites of passage have flourished, theatrically enacting the myths and legends that render human lives meaningful and bring us from one place to another. Life and death, day and night, light and dark, girl and woman, novice and expert: liminality emerges in the in-between of a *passage*. While on the one hand the term can and must be given an extremely narrow and technical delimitation as belonging to the middle stage in concretely acted out ritual passages, on the other hand it is also evident that liminality lends itself to a wider application, as the term captures something essential about the imprecise and unsettled situation of transitoriness (Horvath 2013: 10). Whenever previously existing borders or limits are lifted away or dissolve into fundamental doubt, the liminal presents itself with a challenge: how to cope with this uncertainty? Who can lead us out of here? How so? What is my own role in this chaos? It is thus for evident reasons that a discussion of liminality in the contemporary almost inevitably leads to the core of the modern

project – which, as we know all too well, is one of a constant overcoming of boundaries and questioning of authorities and the taken-for-granted.

The concept of liminality is today experiencing a revival. This revival takes place more than a century after the concept was introduced by Arnold van Gennep, in an indeed remarkable book, *Les Rites de Passage*, published in 1909 (from now on, and throughout this book, referred to as *Rites of Passage*). In *Rites of Passage* van Gennep started out by suggesting a meaningful classification of all existing rites. He distinguished rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another, from those which mark transitions in the passage of time (e.g. harvest, New Year), whereupon he went on to explore ‘the basis of characteristic patterns in the order of ceremonies’ (1960: 10). Stressing the importance of *transitions* in any society, van Gennep singled out *rites of passage* as a special category, consisting of three sub-categories, namely *rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*. Van Gennep called the middle stage in a rite of passage a *liminal period* (ibid.: 11). He called transition rites *liminal rites*, and he called rites of incorporation *postliminal rites*. The ritual pattern was apparently universal: all societies use rites to demarcate transitions.

The universality of the tripartite structure is not to be underestimated. Anthropological claims to universality have been few indeed, as a main aim of the discipline often was to demonstrate cultural diversity and variation. There were therefore good reasons to expect that van Gennep’s study and careful classification of rites would become an instant classic. And yet, this evidently did not happen. The framework proposed by van Gennep was quite simply neglected in subsequent scholarship. When it was taken up again, after his death in 1957, it was done very partially and without much knowledge about Arnold van Gennep and his life-work. That is why a substantial part of this book is devoted to a revisiting and appreciation of the work of Arnold van Gennep. Van Gennep is no doubt one of the most under-rated social scientists – ever.

While van Gennep’s path-breaking discussion of liminality was tied to a touchable, ethnographic platform, it also belonged to something ‘bigger’. Van Gennep was well aware of this. Implicitly and explicitly, he went beyond his comparative analysis of concretely acted out rites of passage to an interpretation of their significance for the very nature and meaningfulness of *life*. He clearly sensed that rites of passage, with their symbolic representation of death and rebirth, illustrate in a more general way the principles of the regenerative renewal required by any society and by any human being. It touched upon something perennial and sacred connected to human existence and the very possibility of meaningful social life. This recognition, and the entire world-view of which it forms a part, makes Arnold van Gennep an intellectual companion of Gabriel Tarde, who likewise insisted on the relatedness of social patterns, repetitions and rhythms belonging to the larger ‘tree of life’. As we shall have a chance to discuss, this vision – tying the minutely uncovered, empirically concrete facts of social life to a philosophy of being and becoming – brought both thinkers into fierce debate with Durkheim and the neo-Kantian dogmatism that was then gaining ground in the social sciences.

In recent years, we have come to know about these debates between Tarde and Durkheim (Vargas et. al. 2008), forcing us to reconsider essential parts of our intellectual heritage and disciplinary genealogies. In line with this re-visiting, this book (and in particular Chapter 2) will reconstruct the debate between van Gennep and Durkheim. It is a debate that provides us with a new and practically unknown angle to the formation of the French and European social sciences.

### *Liminality, Experience and Performance*

Liminality is a universal concept: cultures and human lives cannot exist without moments of transition, and those brief and important spaces where we live through the in-between. Such transitions mark us, they stamp our personalities, and that is the way it will always be. The ancient Greeks knew perfectly well that the middle stage in a ritual passage had its own spatial reality. The Athenian *ephebes* (neophytes) were sent out to the uncultivated mountainsides to have their civic status altered in a rite of passage. Mythology confirmed geography: the adolescent Odysseus was sent to the mountain slopes of Parnassus to undergo his rite of passage to manhood, with Autolycus, his maternal grandfather, acting as master of the ceremony (Endsjø 2000: 358). Whenever neophytes are thrown into a ritual passage, this happens initially by a spatial separation, as the master of the ceremony leads them into the wilderness, subjecting them to a series of tests and personality transforming ordeals.

For a variety of Stone Age peoples caves almost surely functioned as spaces of liminality (Barnatt and Edmonds 2002). Caves were certainly used for funerary and ritual purposes in the majority of Neolithic cultures. Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic caves typically took the shape of dangerous passageways. Without much doubt, these passage-type caves represented passages to another world: the world of the gods or/and the world of the dead. For the Maya, caves were the entrances to the underworld, not pyramids. It is now a well-accepted hypothesis that cave paintings, such as the famous ones at Lascaux, must be interpreted as being part of ritual passages and enacted liminal experiences. Liminal experiences are evidently part of any culture.

Liminality is both social and personal. Liminality reminds us of the moment we left our parents' home, that mixture of joy and anxiety, that strange combination of freedom and homelessness; that pleasant but unsettling sensation of infinity and openness of possibilities which – at some moment, sooner or later – will start searching for a new frame to settle within. And if it does not, the void will perpetuate, and anxiety with it. At the level of psychiatry, Gregory Bateson defined schizophrenia as a 'loss of frames', which is another way of saying endless liminality.

The perplexing qualities of liminality do not of course pertain to the concept itself. Concepts are good to think with, but they do not bear their meaning within themselves. The qualities of liminality pertain to human experiences – experiences of a certain kind. As Arnold van Gennep argued back in 1909, such experiences

are both culture-dependent and universal, and are therefore also comparable. To experience something means, etymologically, to *go through* something. Any discussion of liminality must therefore engage with experience. To take liminality seriously means to take experience seriously, and this was well-recognized by Victor Turner, the British anthropologist who re-discovered the concept of liminality in 1963 and over the next two decades developed his research as one long discussion of this breakthrough discovery. With liminality Turner sought to go to the roots of human experience, and this, as will be discussed, brought him into contact with the philosophy of Dilthey and his central concept of *Erlebnis*.

This book will argue for an experientially based approach to social and political theory. It therefore engages the ‘performative turn’ in the social sciences, as perhaps most famously argued and developed by Jeffrey Alexander. In a series of works (see for example Alexander 2004; Alexander, Giesen and Mast 2006), Alexander has reconceptualized power from the perspective of ‘cultural pragmatics’, essentially approaching social action as social performance. Alexander purposely links a micro-level take on action theory to a macro-level theory of social and institutional change. Much in line with what will be argued throughout this book, Alexander sees a performance based approach as the only meaningful way to move beyond the dualistic structure/agency divide, which to such an extent has characterized the social sciences since times immemorial. Alexander refers to the work of Victor Turner, especially as mediated by Richard Schechner, the dramatist student of Turner and a famous American performance theorist. Alexander argues that social performances can be analogized systematically to theatrical ones (2004). However, Alexander ultimately grounds his own performance approach in a Goffman-Durkheim tradition. This is seen most clearly in Alexander’s key notion of cultural pragmatics, by which Alexander simply means the extent to which ritual action is successful or not. The framework that Alexander sets up in order to make such a judgment is essentially Durkheimian. In societies with a relatively simple social complexity, there is a lower degree of cultural and social differentiation, and here the elements of social performances are ‘fused’. The more societies become complex and differentiated, the more these performance elements become ‘de-fused’. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of ‘re-fusion’, bringing together the various symbolic elements into a whole and communicating meaning to an audience. It is only in this way that rituals become convincing and effective. Here Alexander sticks to Durkheim’s notion of ‘collective representations’ which underpins the whole argument: the goal of performances in any society, is to produce ‘psychological identification and cultural extension’ (ibid.). In successful performance, actor and audience come to share in meanings at the very level of ontology: they come to speak the same language, read from the same script – they fuse into one in the ritual act. Alexander does not believe that a normative judgment of the ‘fake’ or ‘authentic’ nature of the message and its communication is possible nor, hence, of the *carrier* of the message; success ultimately relies on the integrative powers of the performance – or, as Durkheim would have said, on whether the performance

produces solidarity. And here, unfortunately, Alexander re-embeds the indeed huge potential of Turner's approach within a rather implausible intellectual genealogy, re-fusing Durkheimian functionalism, performance studies, philosophical pragmatism and (postcolonial) critical theory.

While sympathetic to Alexander's engagement with performance studies and his important attempt to make them re-ground social and political theory, the approach we wish to develop here does not rely on these Durkheimian premises. Alexander somehow fails to distinguish modalities of experience and performance with respect to the kind of situation we are dealing with; and this is not simply a matter of distinguishing between more or less 'complex' societies or degrees of 'differentiation'. Even if he with great clarity singles out revolutionary periods (including the French revolution) as examples of how performance and social drama come to shape effective history, the necessary distinction between ordinary and out-of-the-ordinary historical moments is not fully elaborated. It is here that a much more thorough elaboration of the concept of liminality serves to underpin the theoretical undertaking in a more sustained way, suggesting a different intellectual heritage within which to develop Turner's approach to social drama. With respect to political events, we will argue how this can be so in Chapter 8 on political revolutions; but the point also has to do with political thought in the most general of ways, and how thought (and Alexander's 'scripts') tend to take shape in precisely such liminal moments.

### *Liminality, Experience and Thought*

Human experiences are connected to thought. That is essentially what political theorist Eric Voegelin argued. In his attempt to establish a foundation of political science, Voegelin recognized that political thought itself had to be understood as symbolizations of real human experiences. Voegelin argued that thoughts are not simply second-order reflections of 'reality', but are themselves part of a historical process (Voegelin 1978, 1987, 1990). Voegelin was particularly interested in human experiences during crisis periods, where the taken-for-granted order of the world ceased to exist. He therefore focused upon the ways in which individual thinkers lived through a certain period, attempting to make sense of their experiences, searching for ways out of the crisis. Voegelin was particularly interested in two types of experience: experiences of dissolution and chaos, and the opposite experiences of order. It was these 'experiences of order' *against* a world of decay that Voegelin (2004) diagnosed as gnostic, to the extent that human beings 'artificially' sought to create order out of disorder through their own ordering devices, claiming participation to be some 'mystery of being', or some 'primary source of truth'. Voegelin also argued that this amounted to an intellectual hubris that was deeply nihilistic in nature, emptying the world of meaning exactly as it was searched for. Nietzsche had of course come up with a very similar diagnosis of the modern world and its world-denying attitude – that attitude which Weber sociologized via his central organizing concept of 'the religious rejections of the

World' and their 'directions' (Weber 1948). But in contrast to Nietzsche, Voegelin understood that any return to 'pure experience' would just exacerbate the problem as identified. Kierkegaard had come to much the same conclusion a century before.

By situating liminality as a central concept for social theory, one must therefore also be conscious of its limits – and limits matter! So let us state it plainly: liminality does not and cannot 'explain' anything. Liminality cannot replace any other term that forms part of causal explanatory frameworks. In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome. At its broadest, liminality refers to any 'betwixt and between' situation or object, any in-between place or moment, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured world-views or institutional arrangements. It relates to change in a single personality as well as social change and transition in large-scale settings; it therefore also, and perhaps more directly so than any other concept we have, ties together the micro and the macro, operating from the 'middle'. Liminality opens the door to a world of contingency where events and meanings – indeed 'reality' itself – can be moulded and carried in different directions.

Liminality explains nothing. Liminality *is*. It happens. It takes place. And human beings react to liminal experiences in different ways. Those ways cannot be easily predicted. But they can be analysed and compared, and at the formal level they share important properties. And this is what this book sets out to discuss, with reference to a variety of liminal situations, in a variety of societies and historical settings. Briefly put, the concept of liminality can help us understand transition periods and social processes of change in a different light.

### *Liminality: Beyond Good and Evil*

Liminality has in recent years been taken up in a myriad of ways. It would be utterly impossible and probably also futile to undertake any comprehensive literature review of current usages of the term, not least because one would need to stretch such a discussion across at least twenty disciplines, ranging from religious studies and anthropology to marketing and consulting. While liminality is certainly not a term that one would ever wish to 'appropriate' by providing clear-cut definitions and boxes, the danger must be recognized that as a concept it can and easily come to signify almost *anything*. This book therefore invites a reflexive use of the term, rooted in its intellectual and anthropological history, and with due stress on the concepts of experience and transition.

There is one widespread but highly problematic usage of the concept that one can and must signal from the outset, namely the tendency to use liminality as synonymous with 'marginality': to simply posit 'liminal subjects' as those who are marginalized and socially excluded. There is an extent to which liminality in recent years has invaded our academic (and popular) vocabularies as part of a fashion, identifying ever new forms of social exclusion and renaming existing ones. Used in such a way, the term has nothing additional to offer. While liminality and marginality share affinities (being boundary-concepts), they are also very