



For a Poetics of Social Life

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GUEST EDITORIAL For a Poetics of Social Life

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One of the burning issues in modern anthropology concerns the relationship between the individual and the larger society. Is society a kind of metallic grid that we all have to move through in lockstep? How many of us feel that it is? And yet how many of us have *not* felt that there were not simply limitations on what we may or may not do, but also outer edges that we could explore, tease, distort (“bending the rules”)? Just as a poem takes the language of ordinary discourse and makes it the object of its own attention, so a socially creative person can make something interesting out of ordinary conventions by pushing them to the very edge of violation, but no farther.

Indeed, this is what a *poetics* of social interaction must imply. The celebrated linguist Roman Jakobson defined the “poetic function”—the quality that we all recognize in poetry and in highly expressive prose—as an orientation toward the *message* as such. A poem is a poem because it draws the reader’s attention to its own form, which often exploits the peculiarities of everyday language and makes them the object of its linguistic play—puns, metaphors, rhymes, odd word orders, and so on—all of them suggesting a multiplicity of messages, none of them ultimately reducible to a single, clear-cut meaning.

That kind of play on form is also crucial to social life. Social life is marked by a high degree of *indeterminacy* and by a set of conventions, which seem both to set limits to that fluid quality and also themselves to shift shape and content all the time. People who play with social form are seeking a special position for themselves, and at the same time helping to fashion—or refashion—the norms and values that the society lives by.

In the Cretan village where I worked, men steal sheep “to make friends”—in other words, to impress others with their prowess so much that the latter would seek them as allies in the tough, competitive world of the highland pastures. But just stealing a sheep is not enough. You must do it in an original way, just within the bounds of the normal—stealing from a much older and tougher shepherd, getting your rival or a policeman to eat the meat of an animal you have just stolen, capturing the animals by some trick (such as setting fire to the brushwood around the sheepfold). And when you tell the story, you add “pepper” to it, making the tale as tasty as stolen meat. If you are a dull narrator, you are probably a dull thief, and if you are a dull thief, you are not worth the trouble of turning into an ally. Think of the exaggerations of normalcy required of someone who wants to be a “regular” person, especially popular—two phrases that imply being *so* conventional that you really are not *literally* conventional (or “regular”!) at all. One must be a poet of one’s own social person in order to stand out in society, but one should not stand out so far as to become unacceptable. Social skill consists in negotiating this delicate balance.

Thus, there are rules, but they become “visible” when skilled social actors bend them. Not everyone can do this well enough, of course, and most societies have misfits whose major misfortune lies in their inability to know when to stop. A man in the Cretan village who came from a poor, weak patrigroup but who liked to shout loudly in arguments over cards and politics simply attracted more and more scorn. But those who do know what they are doing use their social comportment as a kind of *rhetoric*—not, that is, just in the form of elegant words, but as a means of persuasion that includes gestures, social manners, generosity, and a great deal more in addition to the verbal skills that make a person persuasive.

All social life has this rhetorical quality. Some anthropologists, following both their colleague the late Victor Turner and the philosopher Kenneth Burke, have also suggested that social life be seen as a kind of drama. These approaches do not necessarily mean that we should avoid talking about *social structure*, which has long been a staple concept in the discipline. They do imply that social structure exists by virtue of its being constantly reproduced, and this then gives rise to a whole set, infinitely extendable in theory, of parallel structures in art, poetry, music, and architecture.

Architecture is an interesting case in point; after all, we do talk about social *structure*. In many cultures, houses are divided into male and female zones, each with its distinctive equipment, and each invested with a meaning that depends on the other part (what in symbolic studies is called *complementary opposition*). In some cultures, the outside of the house is regarded as male, public, and expressive of the culture of the official polity or state, while the inside of the house is female, private, and full of familiar items that have little historical significance in the larger society. But we should not assume that people passively accept these divisions; the very threat that one *might* violate them is a source of real power, though not of official power. Once again, we see that the certainties of social and cultural life turn out, on closer inspection, to be manipulable elements in a larger social rhetoric, one that uses cultural forms to lay claim to legitimacy and authority.

Nowadays, it is often a nation-state government that makes these claims on the most inclusive level. But at all levels of social life the possibility that a social *performance* will somehow undermine a collective *representation* is always a threat. To manage one’s social life well means knowing just how far to let the performance go in subverting the generally accepted order—or it may (to borrow a term from linguistic philosophy) *constitute* that order. Just as a jury, in pronouncing the suspect guilty, establishes guilt in a social frame regardless of who actually committed the deed, so every social action *constitutes* new links, new perceptions, and new possibilities. When a poor male villager on the island of Rhodes, Greece, “makes good” by dint of hard work, he may feel he now has the right to treat the powerful members of the community as his equals. He tests this by clowning a little more than they, to see whether he gets their amused admiration—in which case he has successfully constituted his new status—or their covert but poisonous jeers.

Scholars have a poetics of social life too. Watch them vying with one another as each tries to achieve more impressive forms of pomposity, more honorable status, more titles and “respect.” Some play it well, others play it less well. The more they try to formalize their actions, the more likely they are to find their bluff called, and the more they make modest disclaimers and tell one

another how provisional their work is, the more they may be hoping to score a hit. Watch yourself and your friends do the same things too. This is a good exercise in *reflexivity*, the analysis of one's own role in what one studies. We are all in it together, because we are all participants in a social world.