RITUAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF BRITISH ÉLITES

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I

EACH spring in Oxford two intriguing phenomena may be observed. First, student finalists dressed in subfusc (a strictly regulated uniform that consists of a dark suit, dark socks, a white shirt, a white tie for men or a black ribbon for women, and an academic gown) gather at the Examination Schools and in their colleges to take the examinations that will determine whether and how well they qualify for a degree from the University. Oxford is the last remaining university in Britain to require that students dress up for exams in this manner.

Explanations offered for the persistence of this practice vary. The most common reason is 'that's how we've done it for eight hundred years'—this is tradition as explanation. Another reason, perhaps, is that students have been shown to perform better in examinations when they are dressed well, though such a sociological explanation seems rather modern for a practice dating back eight hundred years. A third reason, which is perhaps the most explicitly anthropological of the three given here, is that the weeks during Trinity Term when final examinations take place are the single period when Oxford students come into their fullest identity as university students (paradoxically, it is the period during which

their aim is to advance from their student status); thus the examination uniform is a material signifier of one's identity as a student in the University of Oxford.[1]

The second phenomenon that may be seen occurs in tandem with the first, although it does not take place among all finalists. The casual observer will note that some finalists wear a white carnation in their lapel, others a pink carnation, and still others a red carnation. The careful observer, perhaps watching a specific group of students over time, will find that each individual student will wear first a white carnation, then a pink one, and then a red one. Inquiries will reveal that the white carnation is worn by a finalist sitting his or her first exam, the pink one is worn for subsequent exams up to and including the penultimate one, and the red carnation is worn only by a finalist sitting his or her last exam.[2] Further inquiries will uncover the fact that these carnations are purchased neither by the finalist nor by his or her college; rather, a friend or group of friends will meet the finalist prior to the exam and pin it on. The same group of friends will also tend to greet the finalist at the conclusion of his or her last exam and shower the finalist with anything from champagne, flowers and glitter to eggs, flour, and the occasional dead fish.

What is the significance of these practices? First, wearing a carnation is a subtle subversion of the University's strict rules about subfusc that adds a personal element to an otherwise uniform dress code. Secondly, and conversely, the set colour scheme suggests that even this anti-establishment subversion is regulated by its own codes. Thirdly, the paradox between institutional conformity and personal innovation is paralleled in the custom that the carnations are not distributed impersonally by the college administration but rather are purchased and put in place by the finalist's closest friends; moreover the practice is repeated for each examination. The tradition of throwing eggs and flour after the finalist's last exam, which thoroughly destroys the finalist's subfusc clothing, provides a ceremonial conclusion to the examination period and serves to reintegrate the finalist into the general community of students. The destruction of the subfusc symbolizes the completion of the finalist's status as a student and anticipates his or her graduation into 'the real world', where such a uniform is not required.

Taken together, subfusc and carnations have a significance that transcends their materiality: they are manifestations of the ritual apotheosis of the Oxford student. Through the ritual of donning subfusc and being fitted with a carnation, the individual acquires institutional and interpersonal status as a student and as one of

1. Subfusc, but more commonly simply the academic gown, is generally associated with the aspects of life in Oxford that are unique to the University: subfusc is worn by first-years sitting their Honours Moderations examinations, and gowns are worn to college collections (exams), to the inaugural lectures of professors newly appointed to University chairs, and in the presence of the University's two highest-ranking officials, the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor.

2. An alternative to this scheme is to wear the white carnation for all but the last two exams and then to don a pink carnation for one's penultimate exam. The red carnation always signifies the last exam.

a group of friends. Through that status he or she is affirmed as a full (though junior) member of the University. These rituals locate the student in time and place within the public institutional and private interpersonal structures of the University and colleges of Oxford. I suggest, therefore, that this set of rituals is one among many that constitute civil society in Oxford.

II

Twice a year, an equally intriguing phenomenon takes place all over the United Kingdom and in some parts of the Commonwealth. On New Year's Day and on the Queen's Birthday a list is published in major newspapers, such as *The Times*, of the names of people who are to be singled out for one of a variety of honours, from elevation to the peerage to investiture as a knight bachelor to induction into one of a number of 'orders' of honour. In June 1997 these 'honours lists', as they are called, contained the names of some 980 people selected to be honoured for various civil, military, and voluntary 'services' to the nation. Half of the honours were for voluntary service, up from one-quarter in 1986 (Hibbs 1997; Walker 1987: 22). The pattern repeated itself in 1998, when 'the City [was] ignored', 175 of the 976 awards recognized health-sector employees and 40 rewarded educators (Dunne 1998, Shrimsley 1998, Webster 1998). This reflects the contemporary trend that 'in the vast majority of cases honours are awarded for public work beyond that which the recipients are paid to perform' (Sherman and Bale 1997).

I suggest that the biannual honours list (excluding life peerages for simplicity's sake) involves a set of rituals that constitutes civil society in Britain. The ritual by which honours are bestowed serves to initiate certain individuals into a particular status that calls attention to their service—even to the extent of re-naming the person by changing his or her form of address and adding initials to the end of his or her name—such that 'the uniqueness of the person, his [or her] personal identity, subserves his position on the hierarchy' (Hanks 1962: 1252). Thus the ritual may be said to reconstitute their personhood in a way that suppresses their individual autonomy in favour of an institutional—in this case civic—social identity, much as, in its way, the subfusc suppresses personal identity in favour of an institutional one, or the succession of white, pink and red carnations continually reconstitutes the identity and personhood of the finalist from student to presumptive graduate. Furthermore, the honours system, like the carnation ritual, is a mixture of the personal and the institutional; just as the finalist depends on his or her group of friends to purchase and pin on the carnations, so does the potential honours recipient depend on recommendations to the prime minister from sympathetic colleagues and friends (see Hankinson 1963: 118). Moreover, just as participation in the finalists' ritual is not limited to the finalist and his or her friends but rather incorporates an active audience who authenticate the ritual by witnessing it,

so too the honours list involves the implicit participation of those who pick up *The Times* or *Guardian* to read the list of names (for a discussion of how 'ritual blurs the distinction between performer and observer', see Turner 1992: 293; also Lewis 1980). As Gupta (1995: 385) has argued, daily newspapers are critical to the discursive construction of the reality of the state and are an important mediator and translator between government and the individual. Thus in a sense the civic reality of the honours list is established rather more through its publication to the nation than through the subsequent private investiture ceremonies that formally bestow the honour on its recipient.

<div style="text-align:center">III</div>

This essay is about civil society and social anthropology. Specifically, I argue that social anthropology's contribution to the study of civil society has been and should continue to consist in an attempt to understand the relationship between ritual and the social order. Moreover, I suggest that such an anthropological approach to the study of civil society will reveal that, far from the idealistic assumptions (often made by well-meaning sociologists) that civil society has something to do with individualism and equality, the ritual practices that create and structure civil society do so by establishing specific kinds of personhood and the social bonds that link persons. The two vignettes above—and I shall return to the example of the honours list later in this essay—have been presented in order to make three main points. First, civil society is made visible to anthropologists through rituals that simultaneously constitute civil society and create and re-create social persons. Secondly, because ritual and personhood occur in a variety of contexts, the idea of civil society ought not to be restricted to the broadest sphere between the individual and the nation-state; rather, they may be observed mediating between the personal and the institutional in many different settings. Thirdly, through ritual practices and the actions of creating and re-creating social persons, civil society is inextricably involved with power relations and negotiations over status.

The sceptical reader may question the relevance of Oxford traditions and the honours list to the idea of a national non-state sphere of action that is often pre-dicated on notions of equality, and such a reader may well imagine this argument as an attempt to mask what is, in the end, simply snobbery. A cynical reader might point out the historical links between the honours system and corrupt practices popularly called 'sleaze' that date back at least to David Lloyd-George and Maundy Gregory (see McMillan 1969, Walker 1987, De-La-Noy 1992). A more forgiving reader will acknowledge that while 'the term civil society has a specific currency in the history of Western ideas' (Hann 1996: 17), one that does indeed invoke the ideals of nationhood and egalitarianism, none the less there is no universal single currency through which to express the concepts to which the

term 'civil society' refers: the rituals described here assign different moral values to different phenomena, depending on social context. Thus notions of social inequality and corruption may well bear on certain understandings of the meaning of 'civil society' (see Yang 1994, on China; Gupta 1995, on India). A forgiving reader may also consider the extent to which rituals may effect the creation and re-creation, if not cloning, of civil societies over time (Durkheim 1995: 382, 390).

'Civil society' as a field of anthropological inquiry is heir to a tradition of political anthropology that dates back at least to the 1940 publication of *African Political Systems*. In that volume, as Jonathan Spencer (1997) observes, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard emphasized 'the absolute separation between the political and the cultural' and 'observation rather than interpretation'. However, this functionalist separation soon succumbed to attacks that 'exposed the incoherence of the putative separation of political facts from political values, of political behaviour from its interpretation' (Spencer ibid.: 4–5). Responding to the collapse of political anthropology since the 1970s, Spencer calls for 'an anthropology of actually existing politics that would endeavour to gaze wide-eyed at whatever happened to be designated political in our own and other people's lives' (ibid.: 15).

With respect to 'civil society', then, the task of social anthropologists is not only to investigate 'actually existing' political situations, but to determine what, in any particular instance, is 'designated' 'civil society'. This double task is no mean feat: one could devote an entire essay to the wars waged over its definition. To be sure, social anthropology has some catching up to do, as the *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* glosses 'civil society' in the following way:

> Term widely employed in eighteenth-century political philosophy to describe the state, or political society in its broadest sense. The term lapsed into disuse until the early twentieth century. In Gramsci's usage, civil society became that area of society (churches, schools, etc.) within which the powers-that-be create and maintain consent. In Eastern Europe under Communist rule, the term came to refer to a broad sphere of potential opposition to the totalizing claims of the state. (Barnard and Spencer 1996: 597)

The first part of the glossary entry, 'the state...in its broadest sense', is so vague as to be virtually useless as a definition; it would be better simply to use the terms 'the state' or 'political society'. The second part of the entry, the notion that civil society is an arena for the legitimation (or at least acquiescence) of rule by the state, comes closer to a formal definition, but it seems directly to contradict the third part, which explains civil society as a sphere of opposition and resistance to the state. Thus it is worthwhile considering, if only briefly, some alternative connotations of 'civil society'.

The liberal political theorist Will Kymlicka locates 'civil society' outside 'the apparatus of the state' and suggests that it contains 'forums...for non-politicized debate' (1990: 218, 223). Similarly, Ronald Beiner describes 'an autonomous civil society composed of a multitude of voluntary associations separate from (or opposed to) the sphere of the state'. However, he emphasizes that citizenship

within civil society is conceived as a mode of opposition to the 'anonymity, bureaucratic remoteness [and] imperviousness to democratic agency' of the modern state; thus 'citizenship...must be *localized*' (1995: 4). Michael Walzer writes that 'the words "civil society" name the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology—that fill this space' (1995: 153). Standing in something of a contrast to these definitions is Adam Seligman's, which focuses not on 'civil society' itself but rather on the *idea* of civil society:

> what makes the idea of civil society so attractive to so many social thinkers is its assumed synthesis of private and public 'good' and of individual and social desiderata. The idea of civil society thus embodies for many an ethical ideal of the social order, one that, if not overcomes, at least harmonizes, the conflicting demands of individual interest and social good. (1992: x)

The advantage of Seligman's definition is that it separates the ideal of civil society from any particular reality—it retains the fact–value distinction upon which Fortes and Evans-Pritchard insisted. But it also opens up a space for ethnographic investigation—namely how different groups create and re-create their 'idea of civil society'—as well as the arena in which the relationship between the ideal and the real is continuously negotiated.

At this point it may be helpful to turn to a specific instance of anthropological theorizing about civil society. In his introduction to *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models* (1996), Chris Hann discusses the potential contributions social anthropologists have to make to the study of civil society within a more general context of the problem of defining 'civil society'. Hann proposes that

> perhaps the most obvious agenda for anthropological contributions to the civil society debates would be precisely to particularize and to make concrete: to show how an idea with its origins in European intellectual discourse has very different referents, varying significantly even within European societies. This agenda would also be concerned with analogues to the discourse of civil society in non-European cultural traditions, and with the interaction of these specific cultural ideas with the putative universalism of civil society as this idea is exported across the globe. Ethnographic research would focus on how these ideas are manifested in practice, in everyday social behaviour. (1996: 2)

Hann's proposed agenda is anthropologically useful in at least three ways. First, it calls attention to the need to examine 'civil society' in its local contexts and with respect to specific cultural milieux. Secondly, the agenda not only differentiates between civil society in and beyond Europe, it also points to the possibility of internal variation within the notion of 'Western civil society' that is so often treated as a coherent whole. Thirdly, the proposal attends to the relationship

between ideas and practice as ethnographically observable through the medium of 'everyday social behaviour'.

Each aspect of these proposals, however, reveals limitations to Hann's conception of 'civil society' that would unnecessarily bind social anthropology to an intellectualist approach and ultimately lead the discipline to the same impasse at which sociology has found itself. First, while Hann is careful to present 'civil society' as a concept that can vary according to cultural context, he does not attend in particular to the possibility of the historicity of civil society, either as an idea or as a more or less coherent set of practices (I will return to this problem below). Secondly, Hann's understanding of 'civil society' remains essentially European: while he is willing to consider non-European instances of civil society, he treats them as artificial European impositions that are then locally resisted or adapted. Indeed the theories advanced in *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models* seem not to allow for the possibility that 'civil society' might manifest itself in a wide variety of indigenous forms that may or may not resemble European practices. My proposal that the study of ritual be used as a pathway to the understanding of civil society is in part intended to provide a set of theoretical and methodological tools not restricted to Western intellectual idealism. Finally, while Hann's attention to 'everyday social behaviour' is certainly legitimate and indeed important, it perhaps moves too far away from the behaviour of élites and socially important ceremonies. Neither final examinations nor the honours system can fairly be called 'everyday behaviour', but it seems apparent none the less that both sets of rituals—perhaps because of their special status and rarity—contribute to understandings of civil society in Oxford and Britain respectively.

Hann goes on to make a number of useful points regarding how social anthropologists ought to use the idea of civil society. First, he distinguishes between civil society as an ideal value, invoked by politicians and by some sociologists as a Good Thing, as against the facts of civil society, 'with concrete referents that can be investigated through empirical research' (1996: 2). Such 'referents' may be viewed 'concretely' via the honours system. As of 1969 those most likely to receive honours were Tory members of parliament, upper-echelon holders of public office and professors at Oxford and Cambridge; those least likely to receive honours were accountants, clergymen, and solicitors (McMillan 1969: 208). More recently, according to the *Daily Telegraph*, 'between June 1984 and June 1993 there were 952 awards for political [party] service' (Jones 1997). In 1993, the then Prime Minister John Major overhauled the honours system in the name of establishing a 'classless society': he abolished automatic honours for civil servants, opened the nominations process to the public and placed a new emphasis on awards for community service—'hardworking lollipop ladies, deserving postmen and volunteer carers'. However, *The Times* reported that the Prime Minister's reforms did not significantly change the fact that most honours go to high-ranking civil servants, soldiers and political party supporters, even though the Queen's Birthday Honours of June 1996 did include 'one lollipop lady, ...[a ninety-year-old woman] who still cares for elderly patients; ...and a postman well-known for his

charitable feats', and 'most of the 100 extra' MBEs (Member of the Order of the British Empire, the lowest grade of the Order) '...go to people working in the voluntary sector' (Thomson and Pierce 1996). More recently, the current Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has ended (once again) the practice of giving honours for party political service and has ordered a review of the entire system (Elliott 1997). Results have been seen already, in so far as political honours were not awarded in the 1997 and 1998 Queen's Birthday Honours, and more attention was paid to dedicated service in general. To take the example of personal secretaries, the unsung heroes of many offices whose years of devoted service often go unrecognized, whereas in June 1996 approximately eight personal secretaries were awarded MBEs, in June 1997 approximately eighteen secretaries were so honoured. Prime Minister Blair has used the honours list to boost his efforts to give the profession of education a higher public profile and increased prestige. In the June 1998 Queen's Birthday Honours, which were 'unusually free of favouritism or sleaze' (Jenkins 1998), honours were given to forty teachers, heads and school governors; these included two knighthoods, two DBEs and six CBEs (Lightfoot 1998). It remains to be seen whether the reality will approach the ideal with any greater success under Blair than under Major, but none the less the difference is acknowledged.

Hann also draws attention to at least two different underlying assumptions about the person in civil society, the one as socially constituted (see Ferguson 1966), the other as an inviolable individual (see Seligman 1992). Hann's distinction between these two assumptions, alongside his assertion of the specifically Western origins of civil society, calls to mind the history of personhood elaborated by Marcel Mauss, who argued that the Western conception of the individual person as a self-contained, autonomous moral agent possessed of inalienable substance is a highly culturally specific notion, the contingent product of millennia of philosophy dating back to early Christianity and beyond that to the ancient Greeks (Mauss 1985). Since then anthropologists have generally acknowledged two notions of the individual, the one the typically Western idea of a self-contained autonomous moral agent possessed of inalienable substance, the other an idea of the person having no autonomous self-contained substance, but rather being socially constituted only through kinship relations, class or caste status, and social networks. These are the same notions of the person that Hann finds in discussions of civil society. However, in so far as civil society can involve 'space for manoeuvre between the personal and the public' (Goody, quoted in Hann 1996: 20), then the difference between the inviolable individual and the socially constituted individual is one more of degree than of kind. To take one example among many, Dumont's distinction between *homo aequalis* and *homo hierarchicus* is, I think, a useful but limited heuristic device that papers over the extent to which both *homines* exist in Western and non-Western society (see Dumont 1972; Kolenda 1991: 110).

IV

As I stated earlier, Chris Hann does not emphasize the historicity of civil society—a historicity that may be observed through ritual. He interprets Vaclav Havel's observation that 'communism brought history, and with it all natural development, to a halt' (Havel 1993) to mean that 'East European societies were placed in some kind of deep freeze for forty years' (Hann 1996: 7). Hann's reading is correct but perhaps incomplete. As I understand it, Havel's aim is also to emphasize the difference between ideologies of history (as advanced by communist ideologies) and the experience of history (as lived by citizens of East European societies). Havel's understanding of history here is derived from that of his mentor, the philosopher Jan Patočka, whose notions of the importance of civil society rest not only on interdependence in social space but also on interdependence in historical time. The 'solidarity of the shaken', as he puts it, is 'the solidarity of those who are capable of understanding...that history is the conflict of *mere life*, barren and chained by fear, with *life at the peak*, life that does not plan for the ordinary days of a future but sees clearly that the everyday, its life and its "peace," have an end' (Patočka 1996: 134–5). The totalitarian ideology of Czechoslovakia's rulers between 1948 and 1989 claimed—in a manner eerily similar to that of Francis Fukuyama (1992) about liberal democracy—that the conflicts driving history had been permanently resolved and that history was therefore not simply finished, but obsolete.

The importance of this reinterpretation for the social-anthropological understanding of civil society is the following: the rituals that constitute civil society in their various social contexts, even if they are couched in a rhetoric of timelessness, are themselves historically contingent. Thus civil society is not only the intellectual product of a particular genealogy of Western political philosophy, it is *itself* also historically contingent. It is helpful to turn at this point to the volumes edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1992) and by David Cannadine and Simon Price (1987), which, though nominally works of history, explicitly deploy anthropological methods to uncover the historicity of ritual. Hobsbawm defines 'invented tradition' as 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past' (1992: 1). This definition, applied to rituals of civil society, highlights not only the importance of ritual for the establishment of an ideal civic order but also the historical contingency of such an effort. Cannadine emphasizes the extent to which these relationships 'between the earthly order, the heavenly order, and splendour and spectacle' exist in a historical 'dynamic...of growth and development, change and decay, evolution and revolution' (1987: 4, 6). Thus, 'pomp and pageantry, spectacle and splendour, are treated as an integral part of the political process and the structure of power' (ibid.: 12). Cannadine suggests that the difference between anthropologists and historians here is as follows:

> The historians are interested in the working of ceremonial *in* society, whereas the anthropologists are more concerned with the working of society *through* ceremonial. The historians ask about structures of power, whereas the anthropologists ask about structures of meaning. The historians want to know how the ceremonial image and the stability of the state relate to each other, whereas the anthropologists want to know how a society constructs a transcendent symbolic idiom, and how human beings are transformed into divine kings. (ibid.: 14)

The historical approach to the study of ritual advanced here offers social anthropologists the opportunity to explore the ways civil society, in both its ideal senses and its real forms, has changed over time. This may be demonstrated through an analysis of the honours system. Although a handful of orders of chivalry—the Order of the Garter (1348), the Order of the Thistle (1687), the Order of the Bath (1725), the now obsolete Order of St Patrick (1783), and the Order of St Michael and St George (1818)—have long histories, the great majority of orders and medals, including those whose current membership is the largest, were created between 1850 and 1917 (McMillan 1969). As David Cannadine (1992) has found, this is the same period during which the rituals of the modern monarchy were created, often out of whole cloth. The specific historical context of these orders ought not to be understated: it is probably no coincidence that the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (1917), which for the first time opened the orders of chivalry to commoners and women (Vickers 1994: 131), was created at the same time that the First World War (for which most conscripts were commoners) and the universal suffrage movement were bringing unprecedented pressure on the British establishment. If, as Silverman has suggested, 'it might be useful...to think of prestige...as processes whereby the determinants of socioeconomic and power differences are partially obscured', and if 'rituals...might then be seen as acting to solidify and isolate the prestige categories, which have reordered the facts of class and power'(1981: 174–5), then it is worthwhile to consider the extension the OBE to commoners and women as a 're-ordering' of civil society. Although this gesture was clearly not sufficient to relieve social pressures on its own, and indeed may have been intended as a coping mechanism rather than as a concession (see Turner 1992: 297), certainly it was a critical first step in authorizing the entry of commoners and women into a British civil society that was in theory, if not in reality, open to all who deserved to participate.

Cannadine argues that for social anthropologists, 'the rituals of rulers, the "symbolics of power", are not mere incidental ephemera, but are central to the structure and working of any society' (1987: 3). Indeed, the starting-point for establishing the link between ritual and civil society is the work of Durkheim, who describes the rituals of 'positive cults' as

> a whole collection of ceremonies whose sole purpose is to arouse certain ideas and feelings, to join the present to the past and the individual to the collectivity. (1995: 382)

> The rites are means by which the social group reaffirms itself periodically....
> Men who feel united—in part by ties of blood but even more by common
> interests and traditions—assemble and become conscious of their moral unity.
> (ibid.: 390–1)

Malinowski applied this logic to British coronation ceremonies: observing that the
'monarch stands for the nation', he describes the coronation of King George VI in
1937 as a 'large-scale ceremonial display of the greatness, power and wealth of
Britain. [...] The unity of Empire, the strength of its bonds, was publicly enacted.
[...] The coronation generated an increased feeling of security, of stability, and [of]
the permanence of the British Empire' (1938: 112–15).[3]

V

However applicable this theory of ritual and society may be in the British case, my
argument that anthropologists can and should report on the myriad indigenous
forms of civil society, rather than merely on local examples and adaptations of a
European model, depends on ethnographic examples from a variety of settings.
At the risk of being accused of taking a 'world tour' of the social-anthropological
study of ritual and civil society, I want to turn to one important study—that of
ceremonial chiefship in West Africa—which explicitly links ritual with civil
society.

In his introduction to *The Politics of Cultural Performance* (1996) David
Parkin asks 'what is special about power emanating from cultural events, ceremo-
nials and customary practices'. He calls attention to 'the idea of power and
symbolism as distinct variables in dialectical relationship with each other' (Parkin
1996: xv). Parkin cites Sandra Barnes's description of post-colonial ceremonial
chiefship in West Africa as an instance of such a relationship:

> It is a form of chiefship that is neither co-terminous with government nor
> subservient to it, nor even simplistically to be regarded as exclusively a local-
> level political institution. ...These new forms of ceremonially titled chieftancy
> constitute the civic society that many African states seek. ...It is not the result
> of organised central government policy, nor presented by people as filling a
> gap in the hierarchy of a modern political machine. It arises from people's
> confidence in the efficacy of local-level rituals and personalised leadership.
> (Parkin 1996: xxiii–xxiv)

3. Space does not permit an extended account of the importance of investiture ceremonies in
the creation and reproduction of the civic order, but see Fortes (1967) for a helpful introductory
discussion.

Barnes makes explicit her point that 'civic rituals...[provide] a context in which local people make connections to the wider world' (1996: 20). Moreover, 'the chieftaincy sphere makes use of civic ritual as a neutral arena for the expression and consolidation of society's values' (ibid.: 22). The strength of the ceremonial chieftancy lies not only in its ability to draw on pre-colonial historical precedents but also on its formal independence from the post-colonial state; as in Britain, greater honour attaches to appointed chiefs than to hereditary ones (ibid.: 36). The chiefs' civic rituals—especially the installation of new chiefs and the conferment of titles—'constitute a public dramatization of reciprocal relationships and networks. The rituals communicate the fact that high value is placed not simply on this institution but...on the attainments of the actors involved and what they represent' (ibid.: 31–32).

Barnes's ethnography of the rituals of West African chiefship thus provides a direct link between notions of 'civil' or 'civic' society and the ritual practices that constitute such society. Following the example set out in the later work of Meyer Fortes (1962, 1967), the ethnography demonstrates how 'ritual...achieves and ensures the unity of a given political community by stressing the common interests of the people and by harmonizing them with their private interests, with which they are dialectically linked' (Schnepel 1990: 23).

VI

What Barnes's ethnography does not extensively address is the extent to which involvement with rituals of chiefship is both producer and product of power relations among and between individuals and groups. This is also perhaps the most crucial area missing from Hann's assessment of anthropology and civil society, and it is with the discussion of power relations that I wish to conclude this essay.

Civil society, like all aspects of society, is intimately involved in the distribution and redistribution of power. Moreover, the ritual foundations of civil society are bound up with ideas about and expressions of power, not simply the power of society as a whole to which Durkheim refers, but also the unequal distribution of power among and between individuals and groups. On the one hand, these power relations can take place among the persons who participate in civil society. Barnes notes that the West African chiefship rituals

> provide a special meeting ground for individuals whose loyalties and activities often place them at the disempowered, grassroots end of political and economic privilege. Chiefly activities and practices offer...a sphere where individuals of either end of the political continuum gain access to one another. (Barnes 1996: 38)

In Oxford, the practices surrounding the wearing of subfusc and carnations constitute a space within which the finalist and the institution negotiate constantly over the power to enforce conformity and order and the capacity to resist that power and assert individuality. Within the honours system, entry into the orders of chivalry is contingent upon submission to the monarch, and each honours recipient is assigned a grade—nominally proportional to the level of his or her service—within the order in which he or she is inducted. On the other hand, power relations can manifest themselves between those who are 'inside' civil society and those who are 'outside' it. Clear power differentials are visible between finalists and other students, and between recipients of honours and non-recipients, in so far as both *in* the rituals and *as a result of* them, finalists and recipients of honours are given social and institutional precedence. As the anthropologist of religion Catherine Bell has commented, 'effective political ritual evokes a complex cluster of traditional symbols and postures of appropriate moral leadership [and] actually constructs an argument, a set of tensions. Ritual...*is* politics; it acts and it actuates' (Bell 1992: 195).

In this way the final examinations and honours systems are not only examples of moral leadership and its rewards, they also communicate to their audiences the values to which the audience itself ought to aspire (ibid.). Returning to the themes outlined at the beginning of this essay, which interpret civil society as a mediating element between the institution and the individual—in Goody's words' 'opening a space for manoeuvre between the personal and the public'—it is thus possible to conceive of civil society as the outcome of a set of ritual practices, which are themselves

> the very production and negotiation of power relations.... Ritualization as a strategic mode of practice produces nuanced relationships of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance, negotiated appropriation, and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order. (Bell 1992: 196)

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