Social Performance

Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual

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Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy

Jeffrey C. Alexander

From its very beginnings, the social study of culture has been polarized between structuralist theories that treat meaning as a text and investigate the patterning that provides relative autonomy and pragmatist theories that treat meaning as emerging from the contingencies of individual and collective action – so-called practices – and that analyze cultural patterns as reflections of power and material interest. In this chapter, I present a theory of cultural pragmatics that transcends this division, bringing meaning structures, contingency, power, and materiality together in a new way. My argument is that the materiality of practices should be replaced by the more multidimensional concept of performances. Drawing on the new field of performance studies, cultural pragmatics demonstrates how social performances, whether individual or collective, can be analogized systemically to theatrical ones. After defining the elements of social performance, I suggest that these elements have become "de-fused" as societies have become more complex. Performances are successful only insofar as they can "re-fuse" these increasingly disentangled elements. In a fused performance, audiences identify with actors, and cultural scripts achieve verisimilitude through effective *mise-en-scène*. Performances fail when this relinking process is incomplete: the elements of performance remain apart, and social action seems inauthentic and artificial, failing to persuade. Re-fusion, by contrast, allows actors to communicate the meanings of their actions successfully and thus to pursue their interests effectively.

Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and in the intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have their effect and affect. Ritual effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other,

increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant "community" at large.

If there is one cultural quality that marks the earliest forms of human social organization, it is the centrality of rituals. From births to conjugal relationships, from peaceful foreign relations to the preparation for war, from the healing of the sick to the celebration of collective well-being, from transitions through the age structure to the assumption of new occupational and political roles, the affirmation of leadership and the celebration of anniversaries – in earlier forms of society such social processes tended to be marked by ritualized symbolic communication. If there is one cultural quality that differentiates more contemporary, large-scale, and complex social organizations from earlier forms, it is that the centrality of such ritual processes has been displaced. Contemporary societies revolve around open-ended conflicts between parties who do not necessarily share beliefs, frequently do not accept the validity of one another's intention, and often disagree even about the descriptions that people offer for acts.

Social observers, whether they are more scientific or more philosophical, have found innumerable ways to conceptualize this historical transformation, starting with such thoroughly discredited evolutionary contrasts as primitive/advanced or barbarian/civilized, and moving on to more legitimate but still overly binary distinctions such as traditional/modern, oral/literate, or simple/complex. One does not have to be an evolutionist or to accept the simplifying dichotomies of metahistory to see that a broad change has occurred. Max Weber pitted his contingent historical approach against every shred of evolutionary thinking, yet this decentering of ritual was precisely what he meant by the movement from charisma to routinization and from traditional to value and goal-rational society. Rather than being organized primarily through rituals that affirm metaphysical and consensual beliefs, contemporary societies have opened themselves to processes of negotiations and reflexivity about means and ends, with the result that conflict, disappointment, and feelings of bad faith are at least as common as integration, affirmation, and the energizing of the collective spirit.

Still, most of us who live in these more reflexive and fragmented societies are also aware that, for better and for worse, such processes of rationalization in fact have not completely won the day (Alexander 2003a). There is a continuing symbolic intensity based on repeated and simplified cognitive and moral frames (Goffman 1967, 1974) that continues to mark all sorts of individual and private relationships. More public and collective processes – from social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) to wars (Smith 1993), revolutions (Apter and Saich 1994; Hunt 1984; Sewell 1980), and political transitions (Giesen, this volume; Edles 1998), and even to the construction of scientific communities (Hagstrom 1965) – continue to depend on the simplifying structures of symbolic communications and on cultural interactions that rely on, and to some degree can generate, intuitive and unreflective trust (Sztompka 1999; Barber 1983). It might even be said that, in a differentiated, stratified, and reflexive society, a strategy's success depends on belief in the validity of the cultural contents of the strategist's symbolic communication and on accepting the authenticity and even the sincerity of another's strategic intentions. Virtually every kind of modern collectivity, moreover, seems to depend at one time or another on integrative processes that create some sense of shared identity (Giesen 1998; Spillman 1997; Ringmar 1996), even if these are forged, as they all too often are, in opposition to simplistic constructions of those who are putatively on the other side (Jacobs 2000; Ku 1999; Chan 1999).

At both the micro and the macro levels, both among individuals and between and within collectivities, our societies still seem to be permeated by symbolic, ritual-like activities. It is precisely this notion of "ritual-like," however, that indicates the puzzle we face. We are aware that very central processes in complex societies are symbolic, and that sometimes they are also integrative, at the group, inter-group, and even societal level. But we also clearly sense that these processes are not rituals in the traditional sense (cf. Lukes 1977). Even when they affirm validity and authenticity and produce integration, their effervescence is short-lived. If they have achieved simplicity, it is unlikely they will be repeated. If they are repeated, it is unlikely that the symbolic communication can ever be so simplified in the same way again.

This is the puzzle to which the present chapter is addressed. Is it possible to develop a theory that can explain how the integration of particular groups and sometimes even whole collectivities can be achieved through symbolic communications, while continuing to account for cultural complexity and contradiction, for institutional differentiation, contending social power, and segmentation? Can a theory give full credence to the continuing role of belief while acknowledging that unbelief and criticism are also the central hallmarks of our time?

In order to solve this puzzle, I will develop a systematic, macro-sociological model of social action as cultural performance. In so doing, I will enter not only into the historical origins of theatrical performance and dramaturgical theory (e.g. Turner 2002; Schechner 2002; Auslander 1997; Carlson 1996; Geertz 1980; Goffman 1974; Burke 1965; Austin 1957) but also into the history and theories of social performance.[1] This means looking at how, and why, symbolic action moved from ritual to theatre (Turner 1982) and why it so often moves back to "ritual-like" processes again (Schechner 1976).

The gist of my argument can be stated simply. The more simple the collective organization, the less its social and cultural parts are segmented and differentiated, the more the elements of social performances are *fused*. The more complex, segmented, and differentiated the collectivity, the more these elements of social performance become *de-fused*. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of *re-fusion*. To the degree they achieve re-fusion, social performances become convincing and effective – more ritual-like. To the degree that social performances remain de-fused, they seem artificial and contrived, less like rituals than like performances in the pejorative sense. They are less effective as a result. Failed performances are those in which the actor, whether individual or collective, has been unable to sew back together the elements of performance to make them seem connected seamlessly. This performative failure makes it much more difficult for the actor to realize his or her intentions in a practical way.

This argument points immediately to the question of just what the elements of social performance are. I will elucidate these in the section immediately following. Then, with this analytical model of social performance safely in hand, I will turn back to the historical questions of what allowed earlier societies to more frequently make their performances into rituals and how later social developments created the ambiguous and slippery contexts for performative action in which we find ourselves today. Once this historical argument is established, I will come back to the model of performative success and failure and will elaborate its interdependent elements in more detail.

The elements of cultural performance

Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation. This meaning may or may not be one to which they themselves subjectively adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe. In order for their display to be effective, actors must offer a plausible performance, one that leads those to whom their actions and gestures are directed to accept their motives and explanations as a reasonable account (Scott and Lyman 1968; Garfinkel 1967). As Gerth and Mills (1964: 55) once put it, "Our gestures do not necessarily 'express' our prior feelings," but rather "they make available to others a sign." Successful performance depends on the ability to convince others that one's performance is true, with all the ambiguities that the notion of aesthetic truth implies. Once we understand cultural performance in this way, we can easily make out the basic elements that compose it.

Systems of collective representation: background symbols and foreground scripts

Marx ([1852] 1962: 247) observed that "just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed," social actors "anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language." Marx is describing here the systems of collective representations that background every performative act.

Actors present themselves as being motivated by and towards existential, emotional, and moral concerns, the meanings of which are defined by patterns of signifiers whose referents are the social, physical, natural, and cosmological worlds within which actors and audiences live. One part of this symbolic reference provides the deep background of collective representations for social performance; another part composes the foreground, the scripts that are the immediate referent for action. These latter can be understood as constituting the performance's immediate referential text. As constructed by the performative imagination, background and foreground symbols are structured by codes that provide analogies and antipathies and by narratives that provide chronologies. In symbolizing actors' and audiences' worlds, these narratives and codes simultaneously condense and elaborate, and they employ a wide range of rhetorical devices, from metaphor to synecdoche, to configure social and emotional life in compelling and coherent ways. Systems of collective representations range from "time immemorial" myths to invented traditions created right on the spot, from oral traditions to scripts prepared by such specialists as playwrights, journalists, and speech writers.

Like any other text, these collective representations, whether background or foreground, can be evaluated for their dramatic effectiveness. I will say more about this later, but what is important at this point is to see that no matter how intrinsically effective, collective representations do not speak themselves. Boulton (1960: 3) once described theatre as "literature that walks and talks before our eyes." It is this need for walking and talking – and seeing and listening to the walking and talking – that makes the practical pragmatics of performance different from the cultural logic of texts. It is at this conjuncture that cultural pragmatics is born.

Actors

These patterned representations are put into practice, or are encoded (Hall 1980), by flesh-and-blood people. As Reiss (1971: 138) suggested in his study

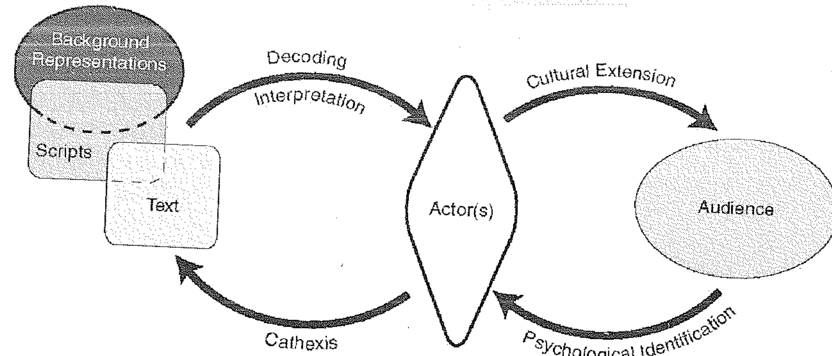

Figure 1.1 Successful performance: re-fusion

of the relation between theatrical technique and meaning in seventeenth-century French theatre, "the actor is as real as the spectator; he is in fact present in their midst." Whether or not they are consciously aware of the distinction between collective representations and their walking and talking, the actor's aim is to make this distinction disappear. As Reiss (1971: 142) put it, the actor's desire is "to cause the spectator to confuse his emotions with those of the stage character." While performers must be oriented to background and foreground representations, their motivations vis-à-vis these patterns are contingent. In psychological terms, the relation between actor and text depends on cathexis. The relation between actor and audience, in turn, depends on the ability to project these emotions and textual patterns as moral evaluations. If those who perform cultural scripts do not possess the requisite skills (Bauman 1989), then they may fail miserably in the effort to project their meanings effectively.

Observers/audience

Cultural texts are performed so that meanings can be displayed to others. "Others" constitute the audience of observers for cultural performance. They decode what actors have encoded (Hall 1980), but they do so in variable ways. If cultural texts are to be communicated convincingly, there needs to be a process of cultural extension that expands from script and actor to audience. Cultural extension must be accompanied by a process of psychological identification, such that the members of the audience project themselves into the characters they see onstage.

There is empirical variation in the extent to which cultural extension and psychological identification actually occur. Audiences may be focused or

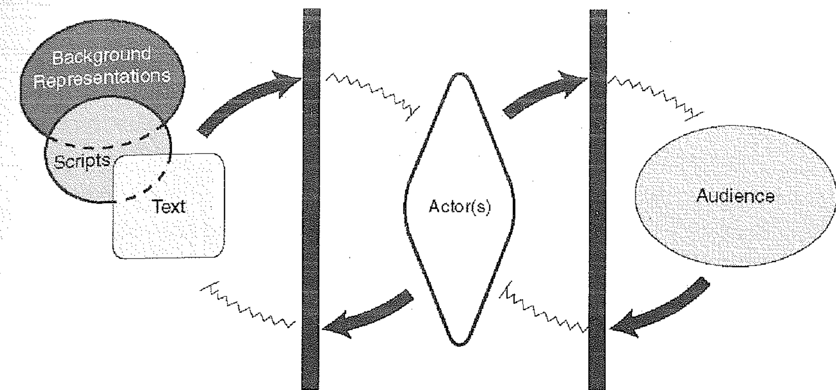

Figure 1.2 Performance failure: de-fusion

distracted, attentive or uninterested (Verdery 1991: 6; Berezin 1997: 28, 35, 250). Even if actors cathect to cultural texts, and even if they themselves possess high levels of cultural proficiency, their projections still may not be persuasive to the audience/observers. Observation can be merely cognitive. An audience can see and can understand without experiencing emotional or moral signification. As we will see in the following section, there are often social explanations of this variability. Audiences may represent social statuses orthogonal to the status of performers. Audience attendance may not be required, or it may be merely compelled. Critics can intervene between performance and audience. There might not be an audience in the contemporary sense at all, but only participants observing themselves and their fellow performers. This latter condition facilitates cultural identification and psychological extension, though it is a condition much less frequently encountered in the complex societies of the present day.

Means of symbolic production

In order to perform a cultural text before an audience, actors need access to the mundane material things that allow symbolic projections to be made. They need objects that can serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent. This material ranges from clothing to every other sort of "standardized expressive equipment" (Goffman 1956: 34–51). Actors also require a physical place to perform and the means to assure the transmission of their performance to an audience.

Mise-en-scène

With texts and means in hand, and audience(s) before them, social actors engage in dramatic social action, entering into and projecting the ensemble of physical and verbal gestures that constitutes performance. This ensemble of gestures involves more than the symbolic devices that structure a non-performed symbolic text. If a text is to walk and talk, it must be sequenced temporally and choreographed spatially (e.g. Berezin 1997: 156). The exigencies of time and space create specific aesthetic demands; at some historical juncture, new social roles like director and producer emerge that specialize in this task of putting text "into the scene."

Social power

The distribution of power in society – the nature of its political, economic, and status hierarchies, and the relations among its elites – profoundly affects the performance process. Power establishes an external boundary for cultural pragmatics that parallels the internal boundary established by a performance's background representations. Not all texts are equally legitimate in the eyes of the powers that be, whether possessors of material or interpretive power. Not all performances, and not all parts of a particular performance, are allowed to proceed. Will social power (Mann 1986) seek to eliminate certain parts of a cultural text? Who will be allowed to act in a performance, and with what means? Who will be allowed to attend? What kinds of responses will be permitted from audience/observer? Are there powers that have the authority to interpret performances independently of those that have the authority to produce them? Are these interpretive powers also independent of the actors and the audience itself, or are social power, symbolic knowledge, and interpretive authority much more closely linked?

Every social performance, whether individual or collective, is affected fundamentally by each of the elements presented here. In the language of hermeneutics, this sketch of interdependent elements provides a framework for the interpretive reconstruction of the meanings of performative action. In the language of explanation, it provides a model of causality. One can say that every social performance is determined partly by each of the elements I have laid out – that each is a necessary but not sufficient cause of every performative act. While empirically interrelated, each element has some autonomy, not only analytically but empirically vis-à-vis the others. Taken together, they determine, and measure, whether and how a performance occurs, and the degree to which it succeeds or fails in its effect. Two pathways lead out from the discussion thus far. The analytic model can be developed further, elaborating the nature of each factor and its interrelations with the others. I will take up this task in a later section. Before doing so, I will engage in a historical discussion. I wish to explore how the analytical model I have just laid out, despite the fact it is so far only presented very simply, already provides significant insight into the central puzzle of ritual and rationalization with which I introduced this chapter and that defines its central question.

The conditions for performativity: historical transformations

The model of performance I am developing here provides a new way of looking at cultural and organizational change over broad spans of historical time. We can see differently how and why rituals were once so central to band and tribal societies and why the nature of symbolic action changed so remarkably with the rise of states, empires, and churches. We can understand why both the theatre and the democratic *polis* arose for the first time in ancient Greece and why theatre emerged once again during the early modern period at the same time as open-ended social dramas became central to determining the nature of social and political authority. We can understand why Romanticism, secularization, and industrial society made the authenticity of symbolic action such a central question for modern times.

Old-fashioned rituals: symbolic performances in early societies

Colonial and modernist thinkers were deeply impressed by the ritualistic processes that explorers and anthropologists observed when they encountered societies that had not experienced "civilization" or "modernity." Some associated the frequency of rituals with the putative purity of early societies (Huizinga [1938] 1950) and others with some sort of distinctively primitive, non-rational mentality (Lévy-Bruhl 1923). Huizinga ([1938] 1950: 14), for example, stressed that rituals create not a "sham reality" but "a mystical one," in which "something invisible and inactual takes beautiful, actual, holy form." Less romantic observers still emphasized the automatic, predictable, engulfing, and spontaneous qualities of ritual life. Weber exemplified this understanding in a sociological manner; it also marked the modern anthropological approach to ritual that became paradigmatic. Turner (1977: 183) defined rituals as "stereotyped" and as "sequestered"; Goody (1986: 21) called them "homeostatic"; and Leach (1972: 334), insisting also on "repetition," expresses his wonderment at how, in the rituals he observed, "everything in fact happened just as predicted" (1972: 199).

Against these arguments for the essential and fundamental difference of symbolic interactions in earlier societies, critical and postmodern anthropologists

have argued for their more "conjunctural" (Clifford 1988: 11) quality. Those mysterious rituals that aroused such intense admiration and curiosity among earlier observers, it is argued, should be seen not as expressions of some distinctive essence but simply as a different kind of practice (Conquergood 1992). The model I am developing here allows us to frame this important insight in a more nuanced, less polemical, and more empirically oriented way. Rituals in early societies, I wish to suggest, were not so much *practices* as *performances*, and in this they indeed are made of the same stuff as social actions in more complex societies. In an introduction to his edition of Turner's posthumous essays, Schechner (1987: 7) suggested that "all performance has at its core a ritual action." It is better, I think, to reverse this statement, and to say that all ritual has at its core a performative act.

This is not to deny the differences between rituals and performances of other kinds. What it does suggest, however, is that they exist on the same continuum and that the difference between them is a matter of variation, not fundamental type. Ritual performances reflect the social structures and cultures of their historically situated societies. They are distinctive in that they are fused. Fusion is much more likely to be achieved in the conditions of less complex societies, but it occurs in complex societies as well.

To see why performances in simpler societies more frequently became rituals, we must examine how early social structure and culture defined the elements of performance and related them to one another in a distinctive way. The explanation can be found in their much smaller size and scale; in the more mythical and metaphysical nature of their beliefs; and in the more integrated and overlapping nature of their institutions, culture, and social structures. Membership in the earliest human societies (Service 1962, 1979) was organized around the axes of kinship, age, and gender. Forming collectivities of sixty to eighty members, people supported themselves by hunting and gathering and participated in a small set of social roles with which every person was thoroughly familiar. By all accounts, the subjectivity that corresponded with this kind of social organization resembled what Stanner (1972), when speaking of the Australian Aboriginals, called "dream time." Such consciousness merged mundane and practical dimensions with the sacred and metaphysical to the extent that religion did not exist as a separate form. In such societies, as Service (1962: 109) once remarked, "there is no religious organization" that is "separated from family and band."

The structural and cultural organization of such early forms of societies suggests differences in the kinds of social performance they can produce. The collective representations to which these social performances refer are not texts composed by specialists for segmented subgroups in complex and contentious social orders. Nor do these collective representations form a critical

"metacommentary" (Geertz 1973) on social life, for there does not yet exist deep tension between mundane and transcendental spheres (Goody 1986; Habermas 1982–3; Eisenstadt 1982; Bellah 1970). The early anthropologists Spencer and Gillen (1927) were right at least in this, for they suggested that the Engwura ritual cycle of the Australian Arunta recapitulated the actual lifestyle of the Arunta males. A century later, when Schechner (1976: 197) observed the Tsembaga dance of the Kaiko, he confirmed that "all the basic moves and sounds – even the charge into the central space – are adaptations and direct lifts from battle."

The tight intertwining of cultural text and social structure that marks social performances in early societies provides a contextual frame for Durkheim's theoretical argument about religion as simply society writ large. While claiming to propose a paradigm for studying every religion at all times, Durkheim might better be understood as describing the context for social performances in early societies. Durkheim insists that culture is identical with religion, that any "proper" religious belief is shared by every member of the group, and that these shared beliefs are always translated into the practices he calls rituals, or rites. "Not only are they individually accepted by *all members* of that group, but they also belong *to* the group and *unify* it . . . A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relation with the profane world *in the same way*, and because they *translate* this common representation into identical practices, is called a Church" (Durkheim [1912] 1995: 41, italics added).[2]

In such ritualized performances, the belief dimension is experienced as personal, immediate, and iconographic. Through the painting, masking, and reconfiguring of the physical body, the actors in these performances seek not only metaphorically but literally to become the text, their goal being to project the fusion of human and totem, "man and God," sacred and mundane. The symbolic roles that define participation in such ritualized performances emerge directly, and without mediation, from the other social roles actors play. In the Engwura ritual (Spencer and Gillen 1927), the Arunta males performed the parts they actually held in everyday Arunta life. When social actors perform such roles, they do not have a sense of separation from them; they have little self-consciousness about themselves as actors. For participants and observers, rituals are not considered to be a performance in the contemporary sense at all but rather to be a natural and necessary dimension of ongoing social life. As for the means of symbolic production, while not always immediately available, they generally are near at hand – a ditch dug with the sharp bones of animals, a line drawn from the red coloring of wild flowers, a headdress made from bird feathers, an amulet fashioned from a parrot's beak (Turner 1969: 23–37).

In this type of social organization, participation in ritual performance is not contingent, either for the actors or the observers. Participation is determined by

the established and accepted hierarchies of gender and age, not by individual choices that respond to the sanctions and rewards of social powers or segmented social groups. Every relevant party in the band or tribe must attend to ritual performances. Many ceremonies involve the entire community, for they "regard their collective well-being to be dependent upon a common body of ritual performances" (Rappaport 1968, in Schechner 1976: 211). Turner (1982: 31, original italics) attested that "the *whole* community goes through the *entire* ritual round." Durkheim ([1912] 1995) also emphasized obligation, connecting it with the internal coherence of the audience. In the ritual phase of Aboriginal society, he wrote, "the population comes together, concentrating itself at specific places . . . The concentration takes place when a clan or a portion of the tribe is summoned to come together" ([1912] 1995: 217).

Nor are attendees only observers. At various points in the ritual, those merely watching the ritual performance are called upon to participate – sometimes as principals and at other times as members of an attentive chorus providing remonstrations of approval through such demonstrative acts as shouting, crying, and applause. At key phases in male initiation ceremonies, for example, women attend closely and, at particular moments, play significant ritual roles (Schechner 2002). They express indifference and rejection early in the performance and display physical signs of welcome and admiration in order to mark its end. Even when they do not participate, ritual audiences are hardly strangers. They are linked to performers by direct or indirect family ties.

In terms of the elementary model I have laid out already, it seems clear that such ritualized social actions fuse the various components of performance – actors, audiences, representations, means of symbolic production, social power, and *mise-en-scène*.

It is the actor/audience part of this fusion to which Service (1962: 109) referred when he wrote that "the congregation is the camp itself." Lévi-Strauss (1963: 179) meant to emphasize the same fusing when he spoke of the "fabulation" of ritual as a "threefold experience." It consists "first of the shaman himself, who, if his calling is a true one . . . undergoes specific states of a psychosomatic nature; second, that of the sick person, who may or may not experience an improvement of his condition; and, finally, that of the public, who also participates in the cure, experiencing an enthusiasm and an intellectual and emotional satisfaction which produce collective support." In the studies of shamanistic rituals offered by postmodern performance theorists, we can read their ethnographic accounts as suggesting fusion in much the same way. "They derive their power from listening to the others and absorbing daily realities. While they cure, they take into them their patients' possessions and obsessions and let the latter's illnesses become theirs . . . The very close relationship these

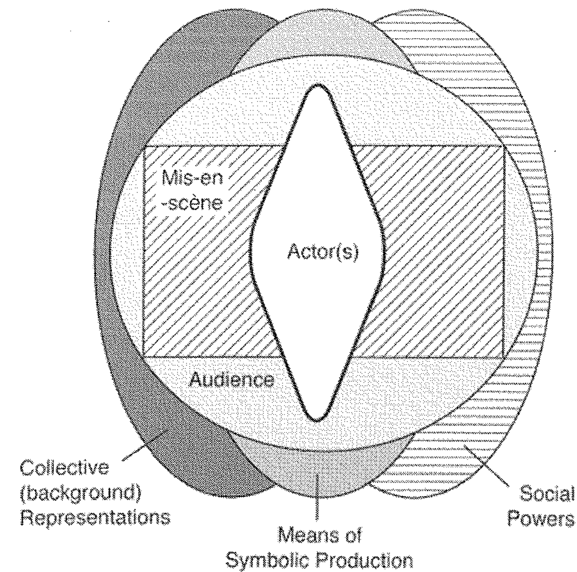

Figure 1.3 The fused elements of performance inside simple social organization

healers maintain with their patients remains the determining factor of the cure" (Trinh 1989, in Conquergood 1992: 44).

With sacred texts tied to mundane society, actors' roles tied to social roles, performance directly expressing symbolic text and social life, obligatory participation, and homogeneous and attentive audiences it is hardly surprising that the effects of ritual performances tend to be immediate and only infrequently depart from the expectations of actors and scripts (cf. Schechner 1976: 205, 1981: 92–4). As Lévi-Strauss attested (1963: 168, italics added), "There is . . . no reason to doubt the efficacy of certain magical practices" precisely because "the efficacy of magic implies *a belief in* magic." Rites not only mark transitions but also create them, such that the participants become something or somebody else as a result. Ritual performance not only symbolizes a social relationship or change; it also actualizes it. There is a direct effect, without mediation.

Anthropologists who have studied rituals in earlier forms of society reported that the tricks of ritual specialists rarely were scrutinized. Lévi-Strauss (1963: 179) emphasized the role of "group consensus" when he began his famous retelling of Boas's ethnography of Quesalid. The Kwakiutl Indian was so unusually curious as to insist (at first) that the sorcerer's rituals indeed were tricks. Yet after persuading ritual specialists to teach him the tricks of their trade, Quesalid himself went on to become a great shaman. "Quesalid did not become a great

shaman because he cured his patients," Lévi-Strauss assures us; rather, "he cured his patients because he had *become* a great shaman" (1963: 180, italics added). Shamans effect cures, individual and social, because participants and observers of their performances believe they have the force to which they lay claim. Shamans, in other words, are institutionalized masters of ritual performance. The success of this performance depends, in the first place, on their dramatic skills, but these skills are intertwined with the other dimensions that allow performances to be fused in simple social organizations.

Social complexity and post-ritual performances

Fused performances creating ritual-like effects remain important in more complex societies. There are two senses in which this is true. First, and less importantly for the argument I am developing here, in primary groups such as families, gangs, and intergenerationally stable ethnic communities, role performances often seem to reproduce the macrocosm in the microcosm (Slater 1966). Even inside of complex societies, audiences in such primary groups are relatively homogeneous, actors are familiar, situations are repeated, and texts and traditions, while once invented, eventually take on a time immemorial quality. The second sense in which ritual-like effects remain central, more importantly for my argument here, is that fusion remains the goal of performances even in complex societies. It is the context for performative success that has changed.

As I noted earlier, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have analyzed the sporadic and uneven processes that created larger-scale societies in innumerably different ways. There is sharply contrasting theorizing about the causes and pathways of the movement away from simpler social organization in which ritual played a central role to more complex social forms, which feature more strategic, reflexive, and managed forms of symbolic communication. But there is wide consensus that such a transformation did occur, that the processes of "complexification," "rationalization," or "differentiation" (Thrift 1999; Luhmann 1995; Champagne 1992; Alexander and Colomy 1990; Habermas 1982–3; Eisenstadt 1963) produce different kinds of symbolic communications today. Even Goody (1986: 22) spoke confidently of the transition "from world-view to ideology."

This emphasis on ideology is telling, and it leads directly to the argument about changes in the conditions for performativity that I am making here. Earlier sociological and anthropological investigations into the social causes of the transition from simple forms of social organization emphasized the determining role of economic change. Technological shifts created more productivity, which led to surplus and the class system, and finally to the first distinctive political institutions, whose task was to organize the newly stratified society and to administer

material and organizational needs. By the end of the 1950s, however, anthropologists already had begun to speak less of technological changes than shifts in economic orientations and regimes. When Fried (1971: 103) explained "the move from egalitarian to rank society," he described a shift "from an economy dominated by reciprocity to one having redistribution as a major device." In the same kind of anti-determinist vein, when Service (1962: 171) explained movement beyond the monolithic structures of early societies to the "twin forms of authority" that sustained distinctive economic and political elites, he described it as "made *possible* by greater productivity" (1962: 143, italics added). Sahlins (1972) built on such arguments to suggest that it was not the economic inability to create surplus that prevented growth but the ideological desire to maintain a less productivity-driven, more leisurely style of life. Nolan and Lenski (1995) made the point of this conceptual-cum-empirical development impossible to overlook: "Technological advance created the possibility of a surplus, but to transform that possibility into a reality required an ideology that *motivated* farmers to produce more than they needed to stay alive and productive, and *persuaded* them to turn that surplus over to someone else" (1995: 157, italics added). As this last comment makes clear, this whole historiographic transition in the anthropology of early transitions points to the critical role of ideological projects. The creation of surplus depended on new motivations, which could come about only through the creation of symbolic performances to persuade others, not through their material coercion.

The most striking social innovation that crystallized such a cultural shift to ideology was the emergence of written texts. According to Goody (1986: 12), the emergence of text-based culture allowed and demanded "the decontextualization or generalization" of collective representations, which in oral societies were intertwined more tightly with local social structures and meanings. With writing, the "communicative context has changed dramatically both as regards the emitter and as regards the receivers" (1986: 13): "In their very nature written statements of the law, of norms, of rules, have had to be abstracted from particular situations in order to be addressed to a universal audience out there, rather than delivered face-to-face to a specific group of people at a particular time and place" (1986: 13). Only symbolic projection beyond the local would allow groups to use economic surplus to create more segmented, unequal, and differentiated societies. Without the capacity for such ideological projection, how else would these kinds of more fragmented social orders ever be coordinated, much less integrated in an asymmetrical way?

These structural and ideological processes suggest a decisive shift in actors' relation to the means of symbolic production. In text-based societies, literacy is essential if the symbolic processes that legitimate social structure are to be carried out successfully. Because literacy is difficult and expensive, priests

"have privileged access to the sacred texts." This allows "the effective control of the means of literate communication," concentrating interpretive authority in elite hands (Goody 1986: 16–17). Alongside this new emergence of monopoly power, indeed because of it, there emerges the necessity for exercising tight control over performance in order to project this ideological control over distantiated and subordinate groups. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 172, italics added) once wrote that, in order to "allow him to *play the part he plays* in feuds and quarrels," the Nuer chief needs only "ritual qualifications." Because the Nuer "have no law or government," or any significant social stratification, obeying their chief follows from the perception that "they are sacred persons" (1940: 173). In his study of the origins of political empires, Eisenstadt (1963: 65) demonstrated, by contrast, that: with the "relative autonomy of the religious sphere and its 'disembeddedness' from the total community and from the other institutional spheres," everything about political legitimation has changed. The sacredness of the economic, political, and ideological elites now has to be achieved, not assigned. As Eisenstadt put it, these elites now "*tried to maintain dominance*" (1963: 65, italics added); it was not given automatically to them. "In all societies studied here, the rulers *attempted to portray* themselves and the political systems they established as the bearers of special cultural symbols and missions. They *tried to depict* themselves as transmitting distinct civilizations . . . The rulers of these societies invariably *tried to be perceived* as the propagators and upholders of [their] traditions [and they] desire[d] to minimize any group's pretensions to having the right *to judge and evaluate* the rulers or to sanction their legitimation" (Eisenstadt 1963: 141, italics added).

The most ambitious recent investigation into pharaonic Egypt finds the same processes at work. "A state imposed by force and coercing its subjects to pay taxes and perform civil and military service," Assmann (2002: 74) wrote, "could hardly have maintained itself if it had not rested on a core semiology that was as persuasive as the state itself was demanding." Reconstructing "the semantics that underlie the establishment of the state" (2002: 75), Assmann finds that in the Old Kingdom Egyptians "clung to the graphic realism of hieroglyphic writing" with an "astounding tenacity." This "aspiration to permanence" meant that state rituals involved "maximum care . . . to prevent deviation and improvisation." Only the lector priest's "knowledge of the script and his ability to recite accurately" could "ensure that precisely the same text was repeated at precisely the same time in the context of the same ritual event, thus bringing meaning, duration, and action into precise alignment" (2002: 70–1). By the time of the Middle Kingdom, Assmann reported (2002: 118–19), "the kings of the Twelfth Dynasty were in a fundamentally different position." Social and cultural complexity had proceeded to such an extent that the pharaonic rulers "had to assert themselves against a largely literate and economically and militarily powerful

aristocracy . . . and win over the lower strata." These objectives "could not be achieved by force alone," Assmann wrote, "but only by the power of eloquence and explanation."

> The assertion of political power was no longer a matter of apodictic self-glorification, but was accomplished . . . by the power of the word. "Be an artist in speech," recommends one text, "then you will be victorious. For behold: the sword-arm of a king is his tongue. Stronger is the word than all fighting." The kings of the Twelfth Dynasty understood the close links between politics and the instantiation of meaning. (2002: 118–19)

In terms of the model I am developing here, these empirical accounts suggest de-fusion among the elements of performance: (1) the separation of written foreground texts from background collective representations; (2) the estrangement of the means of symbolic production from the mass of social actors; and (3) the separation of the elites who carried out central symbolic actions from their mass audiences. The appearance of seamlessness that made symbolic action seem ritualistic gives way to the appearance of greater artifice and planning. Performative action becomes more achieved and less automatic.

The emergence of theatrical from ritual performance

To this point in our historical discussion, my references to performance have been generated analytically, which is to say they have been warranted by the theoretical considerations presented in the first section. While it seems clear that the emergence of more segmented, complex, and stratified societies created the conditions – and even the necessity – for transforming rituals into performances, the latter, more contingent processes of symbolic communication were not understood by their creators or their audiences as contrived or theatrical in the contemporary sense. There was social and cultural differentiation, and the compulsion to project and not merely to assume the effects of symbolic action, but the elements of performance were still not defused enough to create self-consciousness about the artificiality of that process.

Thus, when Frankfort (1948: 135–6) insisted on the "absence of drama" in ancient Egypt, he emphasized both the continuing fusion of sacred texts and actors and the relative inflexibility, or resistance to change, of ancient societies (cf. Kemp 1989: 1–16). "It is true," Frankfort conceded, "that within the Egyptian ritual the gods were sometimes represented by actors." For example, an embalming priest might be "wearing a jackal mask" to impersonate the god Anubis. In fact, one of the best-preserved Egyptian texts, the *Mystery Play of the Succession*, "was performed when a new king came to the throne." Nonetheless, Frankfort insists, such performances "do not represent a new art form." He calls them "simply the 'books' of rituals." They may be "dramatic," but "they

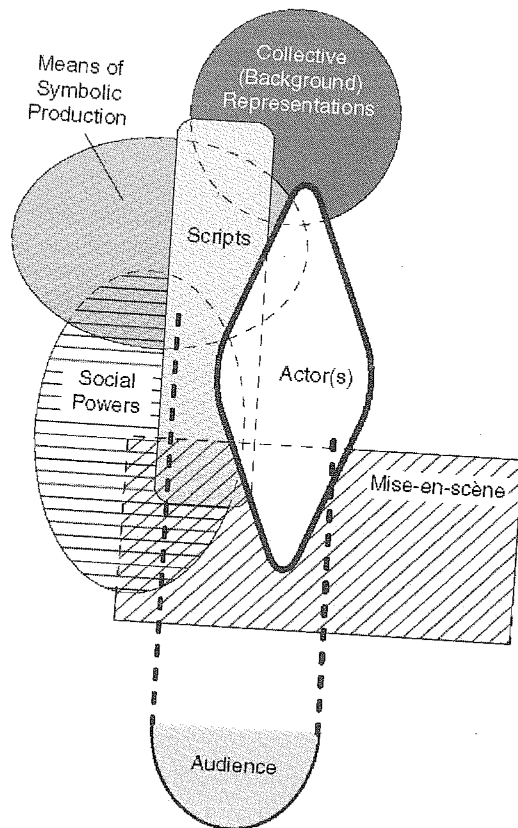

Figure 1.4 The de-fused elements of performance inside complex social organization

certainly are not drama." In drama, the meaning and consequences of action unfold, and in this sense are caused by, the theatrical challenge of *mise-en-scène*: "In drama, language is integrated with action and a change is shown to be a consequence of that action." In Egyptian rites, by contrast, as in Durkheim's Aboriginal ones, the "purpose is to *translate* actuality in the unchanging form of myth . . . The gods appear and speak once more the words they spoke 'the first time'" (Frankfort 1948: 135–6, italics added). It is the actuality of myth that marks ritual.

Only in the Greek city-states did drama in the contemporary sense emerge. The social organizational and cultural background for these developments was crucial, of course, even as the emergence of dramatic performance fed back into social and cultural organization in turn. As compared to the fused and ascriptive

hierarchies that ruled urban societies in the Asian empires, in Greece there emerged urban structures of a new, more republican kind. They were organized and ruled by elites, to be sure, but these elites were internally democratic. As Schachermeyr ([1953] 1971: 201) emphasized in his widely cited essay, the historically unprecedented "autonomy of the citizen body" in the Greek cities was accompanied by the equally distinctive "emancipation of intellectual life from Greek mythology." These new forms of organizational and culture differentiation fostered, according to Schachermeyr, a "revolutionary spirit" that engaged in "a constant fight against the monarchical, dictatorial, or oligarchic forms of government."

This marked opening up of social and cultural space focused attention on the projective, performative dimension of social action, subjecting the ritualized performances of more traditional life to increased scrutiny and strain (e.g. Plato 1980). In Greek society, we can observe the transition from ritual to performance literally and not just metaphorically. We actually see the de-fusion of the elements of performance in concrete terms. They became more than analytically identifiable: their empirical separation became institutionalized in specialized forms of social structure and available to common-sense reflection in cultural life.

Greek theatre emerged from within religious rituals organized around Dionysus, the god of wine (Hartnoll 1968: 7–31). In the ritual's traditional form, a dithyramb, or unison hymn, was performed around the altar of Dionysus by a chorus of fifty men drawn from the entire ethnos. In terms of the present discussion, this meant continuing fusion: actors, collective representations, audiences, and society were united in a putatively homogeneous, still mythical way. In expressing his nostalgia for those earlier, pre-Socratic days, Nietzsche ([1872] 1956: 51–5, 78–9) put it this way: "In the dithyramb we see a community of unconscious actors all of whom see one another as enchanted . . . Audience and chorus were never fundamentally set over against each other . . . An audience of spectators, such as we know it, was unknown . . . Each spectator could quite literally imagine himself, in the fullness of seeing, as a chorist [sic]."

As Greek society entered its period of intense and unprecedented social and cultural differentiation (Gouldner 1965), the content of the dithyramb gradually widened to include tales of the demi-gods and fully secular heroes whom contemporary Greeks considered their ancestors. The background representational system, in other words, began to symbolize – to code and to narrate – human and not only sacred life. This interjection of the mundane into the sacred introduced symbolic dynamics directly into everyday life and vice versa. During communal festivals dedicated to performing these new cultural texts, the good and bad deeds of secular heroes were recounted along with their feuds, marriages, and adulteries, the wars they started, the ethnic and religious ties

they betrayed, and the sufferings they brought on their parents and successors. Such social conflicts now provided sources of dramatic tension that religious performers could link to sacred conflicts and could perform on ritual occasions.

As the background representations became reconfigured in a more socially oriented and dramaturgical way – as everyday life became subject to such symbolic reconstruction – the other elements of performance were affected as well. The most extraordinary development was that the social role of actor emerged. Thespius, for whom the very art of theatrical performance eventually came to be named, stepped out of the dithyramb chorus to become its leader. During ritual performance, he would assume the role of protagonist, either god or hero, and would carry on a dialogue with the chorus. Thespius formed a traveling troupe of professional actors. Collecting the means of symbolic production in a cart whose floor and tailboard could serve also as a stage, Thespius traveled from his birthplace, Icaria, to one communal festival after another, eventually landing in Athens where, in 492 BC, he won the acting prize just then established by the City Dionysus festival.

During this same critical period of social development, systems of collective representations began for the first time not only to be written down, or to become actual texts, but also to separate themselves concretely from religious life. In fifth-century Athens, theatre writing became a specialty; prestigious writing contests were held, and prizes were awarded to such figures as Aeschylus and Sophocles. Such secular imagists soon became more renowned than temple priests. At first, playwrights chose and trained their own actors, but eventually officials of the Athenian festival assigned actors to playwrights by lot. In our terms, this can be seen as having the effect of emphasizing and highlighting the autonomy of the dramatic script vis-à-vis the intentions or charisma of its creators (cf. Gouldner 1965: 114).

As such an innovation suggests, the independent institution of performance criticism also had emerged, mediating and pluralizing social power in a new way. Rather than being absorbed by the performance, as on ritual occasions, interpretation now confronted actors and writers in the guise of judges, who represented aesthetic criteria separated from religious and even moral considerations. At the same time, judges also represented the city that sponsored the performance, and members of the *polis* attended performances as a detached audience of potentially critical observers. Huizinga ([1938] 1950: 145) emphasized that, because the state did not organize theatrical competitions, "audience criticism was extremely pointed." He also suggested that the public audience shared "the tension of the contest like a crowd at a football match," but it seems clear that they were not there simply to be entertained. The masked performers of Greek tragedies remained larger than life, and their texts talked and walked with compelling emotional and aesthetic force, linking performance to

the most serious and morally weighted civic issues of the day. From Aeschylus to Sophocles to Euripedes, Greek tragic drama (Jaeger 1945: 232–381) addressed civic virtue and corruption, exploring whether there existed a natural moral order more powerful than the fatally flawed order of human social life. These questions were critical for sustaining the rule of law and an independent and democratic civil life.

Nietzsche ([1872] 1956: 78–9) complained that, with the birth of tragedy, "the poet who writes dramatized narrative can no more become one with his images" and that he "transfigures the most horrible deeds before our eyes by the charm of illusion." In fact, however, the de-fusion of performative elements that instigated the emergence of theatre did not necessarily eliminate performative power; it just made this power more difficult to achieve. This increased difficulty might well have provided the social stimulus for Aristotle's aesthetic philosophy. In terms of the theoretical framework I am developing here, Aristotle's poetics can be understood in a new way. It aimed to crystallize, in abstract theoretical terms, the empirical differentiation among the elements of performance that pushed ritual to theatre. What ritual performers once had known in their guts – without having to be told, much less having to read – Aristotle (1987) now felt compelled to write down. His *Poetics* makes the natural artificial. It provides a kind of philosophical cookbook, instructions for meaning-making and effective performance for a society that had moved from fusion to conscious artifice. Aristotle explained that performances consisted of plots and that effective plotting demanded narratives with a beginning, middle, and end. In his theory of catharsis, he explained, not teleologically but empirically, how dramas could affect an audience: tragedies would have to evoke sensations of "terror and pity" if emotional effect were to be achieved.

This sketch of how theatre emerged from ritual is not teleological or evolutionary. What I have proposed, rather, is a universally shared form of social development, one that responds to growing complexity in social and cultural structure. Ritual moved towards theatre throughout the world's civilizations in response to similar social and cultural developments – the emergence of cities and states, of religious specialists, of intellectuals, and of needs for political legitimation. "There were religious and ritual origins of the Jewish drama, the Chinese drama, all European Christian drama and probably the Indian drama," Boulton (1960: 194) informed us, and "in South America the conquering Spaniards brought Miracle Plays to Indians who already had a dramatic tradition that had development out of their primitive cults."

Social complexity waxes and wanes, and with it the development of theatre from ritual. Rome continued Greek theatricality, but with the decline of the empire and the rise of European feudalism the ritual forms of religious performance dominated once again. What happened in ancient Greece was reiterated

later in medieval Europe, when secular drama developed from the Easter passion plays. In twelfth-century Autun, a center of Burgundian religious activity, an astute observer named Honorius actually made an analogy between the effects of the Easter Mass and the efforts of the ancient tragedians (Schechner 1976: 210; Hardison 1965: 40). "It is known," Honorius wrote, "that those who recited tragedies in theatres presented the actions of opponents by gestures before the people." He went on to suggest that, "in the theatre of the Church before the Christian people," the struggle of Christ against his persecutors is presented by a similar set of "gestures" that "teaches to them the victory of his redemption." Honorius compared each movement of the Mass to an equivalent movement in tragic drama and described what he believed were similar – tightly bound and fused, in our terms – audience effects. "When the sacrifice has been completed, peace and communion are given by the celebrant to the people," he wrote, and "then, by the *Ite, missa est*, they are ordered to return to their homes [and] they shout *Deo gratias* and return home rejoicing." It is no wonder that Boulton (1960) equated such early religious pageants with acting. Suggesting that "the earliest acting was done by priests and their assistants," she notes that "one of the causes of the increasing secularization of the drama was that laymen had soon to be called in to fill in parts in the expanding 'cast'" (1960: 195).

By the early seventeenth century in Europe, after the rise of city-states, absolutist regimes, the scientific revolution, and internal religious reforms, the institution of criticism was already fully formed: "Nearly every play had a prologue asking for the goodwill of the critics" (Boulton 1960: 195). Long before the rise of the novel and the newspaper, theatrical performances became arenas for articulating powerful social criticisms. Playwrights wove texts from the fabric of contemporary social life, but they employed their imagination to do so in a sharply accented, highly stimulating, and provocative manner. The performance of these scripted representations were furnaces that forged metaphors circulating back to society, marking a kind of figure-eight movement (Turner 1982: 73–4; Schechner 1977) from society to theatre and back to society again. Secular criticism did not emerge only from rationalist philosophy or from the idealized arguments in urban cafés (Habermas [1962] 1989) but also from theatrical performances that projected moral valuation even while they entertained. While providing sophisticated amusement, Molière pilloried not only the rising bourgeois but also the Catholic Church, both of which returned his vituperation in kind. Shakespeare wrote such amusing plays that he was patronized as low-brow by the more intellectual playwrights and critics of his day. Yet Shakespeare satirized every sort of conventional authority and dramatized the immorality of every sort of social power. Reviled by the Puritan divines, such Elizabethan drama was subject to strenuous efforts at censorship.

The Restoration comedies that followed were no less caustic in their social ambitions or stinging in their effects. In his study of seventeenth-century drama, Reiss (1971: 122) observed that "the loss of illusion follows when the *mise-en-scène* is designed with no attempt at *vraisemblance*," and he concludes that "the theater relied . . . on the unreality of the theatrical situation itself . . . to maintain a distance" (1971: 144). Taking advantage of performative de-fusion, these playwrights used stagecraft to emphasize artificiality rather than to make it invisible, producing a critical and ironic space between the audience and the mores of their day.

The emergence of social drama

The historical story I am telling here addresses the puzzle at the core of this chapter: Why do ritually organized societies give way not to social orders regulated simply by instrumentally rational action but instead to those in which ritual-like processes remain vital in some central way?

It is vital for this story to see that the emergence of theatre was more or less simultaneous with the emergence of the public sphere as a compelling social stage. For it was, in fact, roughly during the same period as theatrical drama emerged that social drama became a major form of social organization – and for reasons that are much the same.

When society becomes more complex, culture more critical, and authority less ascriptive, social spaces open up that organizations must negotiate if they are to succeed in getting their way. Rather than responding to authoritative commands and prescriptions, social processes become more contingent, more subject to conflict and argumentation. Rationalist philosophers (Habermas [1962] 1989) speak of the rise of the public sphere as a forum for deliberative and considered debate. A more sociological formulation would point to the rise of a public stage, a symbolic forum in which actors have increasing freedom to create and to project performances of their reasons, dramas tailored to audiences whose voices have become more legitimate references in political and social conflicts. Responding to the same historical changes that denaturalized ritual performance, collective action in the wider society comes increasingly to take on an overtly performative cast.

In earlier, more archaic forms of complex societies, such as the imperial orders of Egypt or Yucatán, social hierarchies simply could issue commands, and ritualized ideological performances would provide symbolic mystification. In more loosely knit forms of complex social organization, authority becomes more open to challenge, the distribution of ideal and material resources more subject to contention, and contests for social power more open-ended and contingent. Often, these dramatic contests unfold without any settled script.

Through their success at prosecuting such dramas, individual and collective actors gain legitimacy as authoritative interpreters of social texts.

It is a commonplace not only of philosophical but also of political history (e.g. Bendix 1964) that during the early modern period the masses of powerless persons gradually became transformed into citizens. With the model of social performance more firmly in hand, it seems more accurate to say that non-elites also were transformed from passive receptacles to more active, interpreting audiences.[3] With the constitution of audience publics, even such strategic actors as organizations and class fractions were compelled to develop effective forms of expressive communication. In order to preserve their social power and their ability to exercise social control, elites had to transform their interest conflicts into widely available performances that could project persuasive symbolic forms. As peripheries gradually became incorporated into centers, pretenders to social power strived to frame their conflicts as dramas. They portrayed themselves as protagonists in simplified narratives, projecting their positions, arguments, and actions as exemplifications of sacred religious and secular texts. In turn, they "cast" their opponents as narrative antagonists, as insincere and artificial actors who were only role playing to advance their interests.

These are, of course, broad historical generalizations. My aim here is not to provide empirical explanations but to sketch out theoretical alternatives, to show how a performative dimension should be added to more traditional political and sociological perspectives. But while my ambition is mainly theoretical, it certainly can be amplified with illustrations that are empirical in a more straightforward way. What follows are examples of how social processes that are well known both to historical and lay students of this period can be reconstructed with the model of performance in mind.

(i) *Thomas Becket.* When Thomas Becket opposed the effort of Henry II to exercise political control over the English church, he felt compelled to create a grand social drama that personalized and amplified his plight (Turner 1974: 60–97). He employed as background representation the dramatic paradigm of Christ's martyrdom to legitimate his contemporary script of antagonism to the king. While Henry defeated Sir Thomas in instrumental political terms, the drama Becket enacted captured the English imagination and provided a new background text of moral action for centuries after.

(ii) *Savonarola.* In the Renaissance city-states (Brucker 1969), conflicts between church and state were played out graphically in the great public squares, not only figuratively but often also literally before the eyes of the increasingly enfranchised *populo*. Heteronomy of social power was neither merely doctrine nor institutional structure. It was also public performance. Savonarola began his mass popular movement to cleanse the Florentine Republic with a dramatic announcement in the Piazza della Signoria, where open meetings

had taken place already. Savonarola's public hanging, and the burning of his corpse that followed, were staged in the same civil space. Observed by an overflowing audience of citizens and semi-citizens – some horrified, others grimly satisfied (Brucker 1969: 271) – the performance instigated by Savonarola's arrest, confession, and execution graphically drew the curtain on the reformer's spiritual renewal campaign. It is hardly coincidental that Machiavelli's advice to Italian princes offered during this same period concerned not only how to muster dispersed administrative power but also instructions about how to display power of a more symbolic kind. He wished to instruct the prince about how to perform like one so that he could appear, no matter what the actual circumstances, to exercise power in a ruthlessly efficient and supremely confident way.

(iii) *The American Revolution.* In 1773, small bands of anti-British American colonialists boarded three merchant ships in the Boston harbor and threw 90,000 tons of Indian tea into the sea. The immediate, material effect of what immediately became represented in the popular imagination as "the Boston tea party" was negligible, but its expressive power was so powerful that it created great political effects (Labaree 1979: 246ff.). The collective performance successfully dramatized colonial opposition to the British crown,[4] clarified a key issue in the antagonism, and mobilized fervent public support. Later, the inaugural military battle of the American Revolution, in Lexington, Massachusetts, was represented in terms of theatrical metaphor as "the shot heard 'round the world.'" In contemporary memorials of the event, social dramatic exigencies have exercised powerful sway. American and British soldiers are portrayed in the brightly colored uniforms of opposed performers. Paul Revere is portrayed as performing prologue, riding through the streets and shouting, "The Redcoats are coming, the Redcoats are coming," though he probably did not. The long lines of soldiers on both sides are often depicted as accompanied by fifes and drums. Bloody and often confusing battles of the War of American Independence have been narrated retrospectively as fateful and dramatic contests, their victors transformed into icons by stamps and etchings.

(iv) *The French Revolution.* The similar staging of radical collective action as social drama also deeply affected the Revolution in France. During its early days, *sans-culottes* women sought to enlist a promise of regular bread from King Louis. They staged the "momentous march of women to Versailles," an extravagantly theatrical pilgrimage that one leading feminist historian described as "the recasting of traditional female behavior within a republican mode" (Landes 1988: 109–11). As the Revolution unfolded, heroes and villains switched places according to the agonistic logic of dramatic discourse (Furet 1981) and theatrical configuring (Hunt 1984), not only in response to political calculation. No matter how violent or bloodthirsty in reality, the victors and martyrs were

painted, retrospectively, in classical Republican poses and togas, as in David's celebrated portrait of Marat Sade (Nochlin 1993).

It was Turner (1974, 1982) who introduced the concept of social drama into the vocabulary of social science more than thirty years ago. For a time, this idea promised to open macro-sociology to the symbolic dynamics of public life (e.g. Moore and Myerhoff 1975, 1977), but with a few significant exceptions (e.g. Edles 1998; Alexander 1988; Wagner-Pacifici 1986) the concept has largely faded from view, even in the field of performance studies. One reason has to do with the triumph of instrumental reason in rational-choice and critical theories of postmodern life. There were also, however, basic weaknesses in the original conceptualization itself. Turner simplified and moralized social performance in a manner that obscured the autonomy of the elements that composed it. Searching for a kind of natural history of social drama on the one hand and for a gateway to ideological communitas on the other, Turner spoke (1982: 75) of the "full formal development" of social dramas, of their "full phase structure." While acknowledging that social complexity created the conditions for social drama, he insisted that it "remains to the last simple and ineradicable," locating it in "the developmental cycle of all groups" (1982: 78). He believed that the "values and ends" of performances were "distributed over a range of actors" and were projected "into a system . . . of shared or consensual meaning" (1982: 75). Social dramas can take place, Turner (1987) insisted, only "among those members of a given group . . . who feel strongly about their membership [and] are impelled to enter into relationships with others which become fully 'meaningful', in the sense that the beliefs, values, norms, and symbolism 'carried' in the group's culture become . . . a major part of what s/he might regard as his/her identity" (1987: 46; for similar emphases, see Myerhoff 1978: 32; Schechner 1987).

However, from the perspective on social dramas I am developing here, this is exactly what does not take place. The elements of social-dramatic performances are de-fused, not automatically hung together, which is precisely why the organizational form of social drama first emerged. Social drama is a successor to ritual, not its continuation in another form.

We are now in a position to elaborate the propositions about performative success and failure set forth in the first section.

Re-fusion and authenticity: the criteria for performative success and failure

The goal of secular performances, whether on stage or in society, remains the same as the ambition of sacred ritual. They stand or fall on their ability to produce psychological identification and cultural extension. The aim is to create,

via skillful and affecting performance, the emotional connection of audience with actor and text and thereby to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience. To the extent these two conditions have been achieved, one can say that the elements of performance have become fused.

Nietzsche elegized the "bringing to life [of] the plastic world of myth" ([1872] 1956: 126) as one of those "moments of paroxysm that lift man beyond the confines of space, time, and individuation" ([1872] 1956:125). He was right to be mournful. As society becomes more complex, such moments of fusion become much more difficult to achieve. The elements of performance become separated and independently variable, and it becomes ever more challenging to bring texts into life.

The challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies, whether on stage or in society at large, is to infuse meaning by re-fusing performance. Since Romanticism, this modern challenge has been articulated existentially and philosophically as the problem of authenticity (Taylor 1989). While the discourse about authenticity is parochial, in the sense that it is specifically European, it provides a familiar nomenclature for communicating the sense of what performative success and failure mean. On the level of everyday life, authenticity is thematized by such questions as whether a person is "real" – straightforward, truthful, and sincere. Action will be viewed as real if it appears *sui generis*, the product of a self-generating actor who is not pulled like a puppet by the strings of society. An authentic person seems to act without artifice, without self-consciousness, without reference to some laboriously thought-out plan or text, without concern for manipulating the context of her actions, and without worries about that action's audience or its effects. The attribution of authenticity, in other words, depends on an actor's ability to sew the disparate elements of performance back into a seamless and convincing whole. If authenticity marks success, then failure suggests that a performance will seem insincere and faked: the actor seems out of role, merely to be reading from an impersonal script, pushed and pulled by the forces of society, acting not from sincere motives but to manipulate the audience.

Such an understanding allows us to move beyond the simplistic polarities of ritual versus rationality or, more broadly, of cultural versus practical action. We can say, instead, that re-fusion allows ritual-like behavior, a kind of temporary recovery of the ritual process. It allows contemporaries to experience ritual because it stitches seamlessly together the disconnected elements of cultural performance. In her performative approach to gender, Butler (1999: 179) insisted that gender identity is merely "the stylized repetition of acts through time" and "not a seemingly seamless identity." Yet seamless is exactly what the successful performance of gender in everyday life makes it appear to be.