

Ritual,
Politics,
and
Power

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Preface

Although the political rites examined in these pages encompass many centuries and almost all parts of the world, the impetus for this book comes from my own experiences: political observations made primarily in the United States and Italy, but also in all too brief visits to Sri Lanka and China, to Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Ivory Coast, to Brazil and Colombia. Even for the transient visitor, it is difficult to avoid encounters with the rites and symbols of politics. From making my way across an Addis Ababa boulevard clogged with demonstrators supporting the new Ethiopian military conscription law in 1983 to being the object of a banquet toast in Beijing to a future under the wise guidance of the Central Committee, I found myself puzzling at the symbolic forms politics take.

But the genesis of this book is to be found closer to home. My most vivid childhood political memories are of political rites, and in this I think myself no different from others. What remains most memorable to me about John Kennedy's presidential campaign of 1960 comes from a festively decorated motorcade of the then candidate down the main highway of Long Island. Loudspeakers boomed the campaign theme song ("Vote for Kennedy, vote for victory . . .") while the crowds lining the streets waved multicolored banners and life-size pictures of the candidate. Three years later, the Kennedy funeral rites provided me, along

with so many others, with a dramatic ritual close to the brief Kennedy era. The rites brought Americans together to a degree not seen since.

From college, during the civil rights and Vietnam war protests, of all the political activities to which my fellow students and I devoted so much time, the most salient memories come from the mass demonstrations—marching through the streets of New York, marching from the Capitol to the Pentagon and symbolically blocking the entrances, and sitting in during a recruitment visit by the Central Intelligence Agency on campus. In Italy in the 1970s I encountered a different, yet familiar, series of political rites, from the neighborhood festivals organized by the Communist party, in effect doing ritual battle with the Roman Catholic Church, to the rites surrounding the kidnapping and bodyless burial of Aldo Moro, president of the Christian Democratic party.

The origins of this book spring from all these sources. I was struck by the ubiquity of political rites and perplexed that scholars had attributed so little significance to them. For an anthropologist like myself, nothing could be more normal than tracing the relationships between ritual and politics. Yet, to date, anthropological studies have too often been dismissed as bearing only on the political organization of "primitives" living in small-scale societies. Historians, especially in the past couple of decades, have provided many valuable descriptions of political rites, but these too are commonly dismissed by readers as the quaint customs of a bygone era. Some political scientists have questioned the assumptions of the classic "political man" model of the rational bases of modern political action, but studies of political rites remain underdeveloped and largely ignored by the mainstream of the discipline.

In searching out the universal principles behind the political uses of ritual, I take a broad view of humanity, which ranges from mountain tribesmen in New Guinea to construction workers in Ohio, from the rites of chiefs in precolonial Chad to the rites of modern presidents and prime ministers. I go back to the ancient Chinese dynasties and to the Roman Empire, to European kings of past centuries and to the sacred rulers of the Sandwich Islands. Although this historical and anthropological edification may raise the hackles of some areal and period specialists, it is only by taking such an expansive view that I can make my point. Only by looking at peoples around the world and back in time can we make out the common threads that unite us.

This book has benefited, though I have occasionally suffered, from its long gestation. It was begun in 1982–83, a year I spent at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, supported by the Center and by grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur

Foundation and the Bowdoin College Faculty Research Fund. The Center offered an ideal ambience for this work. Constant contact with colleagues from a variety of disciplines and excellent library facilities were a tremendous help. I would like in particular to thank James Fernandez, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Thomas Trobasso, Sherry Orner, Samuel Barnes, and Ray Kelly for their help as sounding boards and valuable sources of bibliographical suggestions. I would also like to thank Margaret Amara, the Center librarian, for all her help.

Following three years of sporadic labors, aided by the library assistance of Kate Dempsey and the Bowdoin College library staff, a grant from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, together with supplementary funding from Bowdoin College, gave me the freedom to spend 1986–87 completing the manuscript. I chose to spend the year in Bologna, Italy, to allow me to learn more about European politics and through geographical distance to gain some valuable perspective on American political life. Arturo Parisi, Marzio Barbagli, Massimo Marcolin, and Egeria di Nallo helped make this an enjoyable and productive year by aiding with my local arrangements. Arturo Parisi and Pier Cesare Bori also provided kind assistance with scholarly sources.

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Finally, thanks are due Susan, Molly, and Seth, who were uprooted from Maine first to spend a year in California and then another year in Italy so that I could write this book. Indeed, I could only complete this manuscript by dispossessing Seth of his bedroom in Bologna every day for many months so that I could have a quiet place to work. If I too often snapped at Molly when she interrupted me to ask questions about Dante or Verga for her Bologna public school homework, or at Seth for his interruptions to ask who was the shortest player to dunk a basketball, I take this occasion to apologize. I dedicate this book to Susan, with apologies for the fact that copies of this book are not nestled next to the *National Enquirer* at the checkout shelf of Shop-&-Save.

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The Power of Rites

On September 15, 1810, the Creole priest Miguel Hidalgo summoned his parishioners to the village church and called on them to rise up against the oppressive government of the Spanish colony of Mexico, thus catalyzing a bloody revolt. Over a century and a half later, on each September 15 at exactly 11:00 p.m.—the hour when Hidalgo issued his call to rebellion—the president of Mexico steps onto the balcony of the National Palace in Mexico City, bearing the nation's tricolored flag. Above a central plaza packed with celebrating citizens, he bellows the ceremonial shout: "Viva La Independencia! Viva Hidalgo! Viva Morelos! Viva Juarez! Viva Mexico!" A thunderous "Vival" from the euphoric crowd greets each phrase as his amplified voice resounds through the plaza. Stepping aside, the president rings the palace bells, which are soon joined by those of the National Cathedral. Fireworks light the heavens; the final glowing colors in the sky form the face of Father Hidalgo as he shouted his original "Vival" in that obscure church so many years ago.¹

From national party convention to presidential inauguration, from congressional committee hearing to the roar of the football stadium crowd belting out the national anthem, ritual is a ubiquitous part of modern political life. Through ritual aspiring political leaders struggle to assert their right to rule, incumbent power holders seek to bolster their authority, and revolutionaries try to carve out a new basis of political allegiance. All of these political figures, from leaders of insurrections to champions of the status quo, use rites to create political reality for the people around them. Through participation in the rites, the citizen of the modern state identifies with larger political forces that can only be seen in symbolic

form. And through political ritual, we are given a way to understand what is going on in the world, for we live in a world that must be drastically simplified if it is to be understood at all.

Yet few people recognize how important ritual is in modern politics. Because ritual is usually identified with religion and, since modern Western societies have presumably separated political affairs from religious life, there is an assumption that ritual remains politically significant only in less "advanced" societies.²

But is industrial society really any different in its sacralization of power? Are politics now the product of rational activities by bureaucrats, are political allegiances decided by cost-benefit analysis, and are leaders regarded by the public as essentially no different from themselves? In Polynesia, temporal rulers were viewed as descendants of the gods and, as such, they radiated *mana*, or supernatural power. Being so powerful, they were surrounded by a web of rituals that governed all interaction with their subjects.³ Although no such supernatural rationalization of secular power prevails today in the United States or in other industrial states, the politically powerful nonetheless are still surrounded by rites that govern their interaction with the public and with each other when they are in the public eye. Political ritual, as Shils quips, has been given a "bad name" by Western intellectuals raised in utilitarian traditions.⁴ Blinded by their rational model of the political universe, these intellectuals ignore the ritual that envelops political action and political power.⁵

In these pages I try to show why ritual is important in all political systems and to point out the many ways ritual is employed in politics. In doing this I argue against the common view that political ritual merely serves to bolster the status quo. Ritual is much more important to politics than this. True, kings use ritual to shore up their authority, but revolutionaries use ritual to overthrow monarchs. The political elite employ ritual to legitimate their authority, but rebels battle back with rites of delegitimation. Ritual may be vital to reaction, but it is also the life blood of revolution.

Politics, Symbolism, and Ritual

Politics is expressed through symbolism. Rather little that is political involves the use of direct force, and, though material resources are crucial to the political process, even their distribution and use are largely shaped through symbolic means. To understand the political process, then, it is necessary to understand how the symbolic enters into politics, how politi-

cal actors consciously and unconsciously manipulate symbols, and how this symbolic dimension relates to the material bases of political power.⁶

Symbolism is involved in politics in many ways. In these pages I focus on just one, ritual. Anthropologists have long been associated in the public view with the search for quaint rites and seemingly illogical behavior. My goal, however, is not to exhume the exotic but to challenge some comfortable assumptions about the bases of our own political systems. Although many political observers in the United States and other industrial nations have noted the ritual behavior associated with politics, few have ever taken it seriously. They view ritual as mere embellishment for more important, "real" political activities. But, in fact, ritual is an integral part of politics in modern industrial societies; it is hard to imagine how any political system could do without it.

The ubiquity of political ritual is reflected in the range of political systems that appears in these pages. I draw on cases from small-scale nonliterate societies of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, but given my central theme, I pay special attention to the use of ritual in the politics of state societies in Europe and North America. Besides trying to provide a global perspective by drawing on societies from all over the world, I also dig into the historical literature to examine political uses of ritual in societies of past times. From all this, a common pattern emerges, a legacy from which modern bureaucratic nations are not exempt.

The Power of Symbols

Since my argument rests on the importance of symbolism in politics, it makes sense to begin with some general observations about the role of symbolism in human societies and in people's lives. Thurman Arnold, a witty legal scholar of a half-century ago, observed that all human conduct and all institutional behavior are symbolic. Arnold attempted to puncture the common conceit that people in modern societies behave in pragmatic, goal-oriented ways. On the contrary, he declared, "Society is generally more interested in standing on the side lines and watching itself go by in a whole series of different uniforms than it is in practical objectives." Scholars, chided Arnold, cannot bear the idea that people are more influenced by symbolic forms than by utilitarian calculations. As a consequence, the "chief interest of the intellectual is to prove that such irrational conduct is inherently rational—or else the product of some form of group sinning."⁷

But let me back up a bit here and begin by considering the individual's relation to his or her culture. Human reality is not provided at

birth by the physical universe, but rather must be fashioned by individuals out of the culture into which they are born and the experiences they have, experiences that bring them into contact with other people and with various parts of nature. The world out there confronts each individual with an infinite number of stimuli, yet no one can deal with all of them. We must be selective in our perceptions, and those aspects of the world that are selected must be further reduced and reordered in terms of some system of simplification (or categorization) that allows us to make sense of them. This order is largely provided by the symbol system we learn as members of our culture, a system that allows for both social creativity and individual idiosyncrasy.

Such symbol systems provide a "shield against terror."⁸ They are a means, indeed the primary means, by which we give meaning to the world around us; they allow us to interpret what we see, and, indeed, what we are. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this symbolic process is its taken-for-granted quality.⁹ People are not generally aware that they themselves endow the world with their own symbolically constructed version of reality. On the contrary, people believe the world simply presents itself in the form in which it is perceived. This may be naive, but it is nevertheless necessary. We could not get out of bed in the morning if we did not subscribe to this view, for if we fully recognized the extent to which our notions of reality are the product of an artificially constructed symbol system, it would be, as Kenneth Burke pointed out, "like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss."¹⁰

Through symbols we confront the experiential chaos that envelops us and create order. By objectifying our symbolic categories, rather than recognizing them as products of human creation, we see them as somehow the products of nature, "things" that we simply perceive and recognize. Indeed, the very distinction we make between the objective world and the subjective world is itself a product of humanly created symbols that divide the world of fact from the world of opinion.¹¹

That people perceive the world through symbolic lenses does not mean that people or cultures are free to create any symbolic system imaginable, or that all such constructs are equally tenable in the material world. There is a continuous interaction between the ways people have of dealing with the physical and social universe and the actual contours of that universe. When symbolic systems collide with refractory social or physical forces, the potential for change in the symbolic system is ever present. Moreover, symbols do not simply arise spontaneously, nor is the continuing process of redefinition of the symbolic universe a matter of chance. Both are heavily influenced by the distribution of resources

found in the society and the relationships that exist with other societies. Though symbols give people a way of understanding the worlds, it is people who produce new symbols and transform the old.

Symbolism in Politics

In a playful passage, Thomas Carlyle asks us to envision a pompous ceremonial gathering in Britain, replete with dukes, colonels, generals, and others of lofty status. Imagine, he says, that with a wave of the wand their clothes were all to vanish and they were left entirely naked. What would happen to the dignity of the occasion? Pursuing the point, Carlyle asks, "Lives there a man that can figure a naked Duke of Windiestraw addressing a naked House of Lords? Imagination, choked as in mephitic air, recoils on itself, and will not forward with the picture." Carlyle's clothes are one example of how all objects function in human society, for they all act as symbols, endowed with special meaning. To say that a person is clothed with authority is something more than metaphorical.¹²

Through symbolism we recognize who are the powerful and who are the weak, and through the manipulation of symbols the powerful reinforce their authority. Yet, the weak, too, can try to put on new clothes and to strip the clothes from the mighty. In Kessler's words, "The symbolic is not a residual dimension of purportedly real politics; still less is it an insubstantial screen upon which real issues are cast in pale and passive form. The symbolic is real politics, articulated in a special and often most powerful way."¹³ Political reality is in good part created through symbolic means, as many a candidate for political office has recognized. Creating a symbol or, more commonly, identifying oneself with a popular symbol can be a potent means of gaining and keeping power, for the hallmark of power is the construction of reality.¹⁴

Some political observers have gone so far as to say that people live in a "dream world," a world of "illusion." They contrast the "real" world with this phantom realm of the symbol. In a stirring passage written in the shadow of Hitler's preparations for war, Max Lerner, horrified by the adulatory allegiance evoked by the Fuehrer, warned that while the power of dictators derives from the "symbols that they manipulate, the symbols depend in turn upon the entire range of associations that they invoke." He concluded: "The power of these symbols is enormous. Men possess thoughts, but symbols possess men."¹⁵ Yet, just as Hitler's skillful manipulation of symbols was inspiring the German people to war, so a different set of symbols was being powerfully framed by Churchill, Roosevelt, and others to mobilize the opposition.¹⁶

Modern wars depend on a sense of national allegiance, but the nation itself has no palpable existence outside the symbolism through which it is envisioned. As Walzer puts it, "The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived."¹⁷ People subscribe to the "master fiction" that the world is divided into a fixed number of mutually exclusive nations; they see these units as part of the nature of things, and assume an antiquity that the nations in fact lack. This symbolic conception of the universe leads people to believe that everyone "has" a nationality, in the same sense that everyone has a gender. It is in this light that Benedict Anderson defined a nation as "an imagined political community." Far from being window dressing on the reality that is the nation, symbolism is the stuff of which nations are made.¹⁸

Symbols instigate social action and define the individual's sense of self. They also furnish the means by which people make sense of the political process, which largely presents itself to people in symbolic form. When Americans form their opinions regarding the activities of the president or the Congress, they do so mainly on the basis of the manipulation of symbols by these officeholders, in conjunction with their own material experiences, which are themselves perceived in good part through a symbolic filter. For this reason one observer of the American presidency concluded that "Politics is primarily the art of understanding the symbols in actually operative in society and learning how to make them issue forth in action. . . . It is the art of governing not rationalists, but people." In electing a president, we elect "the chief symbol-maker of the land. . . ." ¹⁹

The strength of people's allegiance to political symbols was certainly evident in Ohio during the days of inflamed patriotic zeal accompanying the captivity of the American embassy personnel in Iran. When the workers at a construction site were ordered by their boss to remove the American flag decals they sported on their hard hats, they staunchly refused. As one worker explained, "The hat says who you are . . ."—and, of course, so did the miniaturized stars and stripes.²⁰

As this example of national allegiance shows, modern politics depends on people's tendency to rely on political institutions. Entities such as "government," "party," or the "state" are not viewed as symbolically constructed. Rather, they are thought of as objects that exist independently of people and their symbolic universe. Children find it easier to conceive of authority in terms of a person like the president (or a teacher) rather than a collectivity such as Congress. Similarly, adults use the metaphor of a "body" to conceive of Congress, which allows them to treat a variegated group of people as a single entity.

Perhaps this can be made clearer by recounting the story of the Indian who came to see the "government" in Ottawa. The Indian grew increasingly frustrated as he was led from one office to the next, meeting one man after another who claimed responsibility for government affairs, yet never confronting the "government" itself, who, he thought, did a good job of keeping himself hidden.²¹

Many of the most potent political symbols have a palpable quality to them, making it easier for people to treat concepts as things. This is evident in the metaphors that help define the political universe. For numerous Americans, an "iron curtain" lies across Europe, separating those on the other side from the "free world." Similarly, a flag is not simply a decorated cloth, but the embodiment of a nation; indeed, the nation is defined as much by the flag as the flag is defined by the nation.

Studies of politics in modern states, with a few important exceptions, pay little attention to the role of the symbolic in the political process.²² In many studies, politics is examined as a give-and-take in which people simply follow their material interests. These material interests are often taken to be self-evident. In other studies, people are viewed as consumers in a public relations market, or as empty slates socialized to reproduce the political views of their parents, peers, or neighbors.

The lack of systematic studies of the symbolic dimension of politics in contemporary Western societies is no doubt also due to the difficulty all people face in examining their own symbol systems. Since people perceive the world through symbolic lenses, it is difficult for them to be conscious of just what those symbols consist of and what influence they have.²³

The underdevelopment of studies on the symbolic dimension of modern politics is also due to the kinds of empirical methods emphasized in modern social science. Symbols cannot be satisfactorily studied in quantitative terms, nor through surveys or electoral analyses. In emphasizing such methods, analysts have a tendency to assume that those aspects of politics that cannot be easily quantified must be unimportant. To complete the vicious circle, the resulting empirical studies then reinforce the view that modern politics is determined by rational action.²⁴ Clifford Geertz points out some of the flaws in such approaches:

The main defects of the interest theory are that its psychology is too anemic and its sociology too muscular. Lacking a developed analysis of motivation, it has been constantly forced to oscillate between a narrow and superficial utilitarianism that sees men as impelled by rational calculation of their consciously recognized personal advantage and a broader, but no less superficial, historicism that speaks with a studied vagueness of men's ideas as somehow

"reflecting," "expressing," "corresponding to," "emerging from," or "conditioned by" their social commitments.²⁵

In short, people are not merely material creatures, but also symbol producers and symbol users. People have the unsettling habit of willingly, even gladly, dying for causes that oppose their material interests, while vociferously opposing groups that espouse them. It is through symbols that people give meaning to their lives; full understanding of political allegiances and political action hinges on this fact.²⁶

To argue that symbolism and ritual play important roles in the political process in Western societies flies in the face of much received wisdom. Yet, far from arguing that politics becomes less encrusted in symbol and myth as a society grows more complex, I suggest that a case could be made that just the reverse is true. Living in a society that extends well beyond our direct observation, we can relate to the larger political entity only through abstract symbolic means. We are, indeed, ruled by power holders whom we never encounter except in highly symbolic presentations. And what political environment could be more dependent on symbolism than one in which our decision whether to pat a person on the back or to shoot him in the back depends on the color of the uniform he wears? With the increase in the size of the state and the growth of bureaucracy, Michael Walzer observes, politics is transformed "from a concrete activity into what Marx once called the fantasy of everyday life."²⁷

Defining Ritual

Before examining the role of ritual in politics, I should clarify what "ritual" means. Here, I take a middle path between an overly restrictive definition, which would limit ritual to the religious sphere and identify it with the supernatural, and an overly broad definition, labeling as ritual any standardized human activity. In defining ritual, I am not, of course, trying to discover what ritual "really" is, for it is not an entity to be discovered. Rather, ritual is an analytical category that helps us deal with the chaos of human experience and put it into a coherent framework. There is thus no right or wrong definition of ritual, but only one that is more or less useful in helping us understand the world in which we live. My own use of the term reflects my goal of shedding light on how symbolic processes enter into politics and why these are important.

Until a generation ago, anthropologists typically defined ritual as culturally standardized, repetitive activity, primarily symbolic in character, aimed at influencing human affairs (or at least allowing humans to

understand better their place in the universe), and involving the supernatural realm.²⁸ Durkheim offered the most influential early scientific view of ritual, relating it to religious practices, which, he believed, divide the world into two classes: the sacred and the profane. Rites, he asserted, are the "rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects."²⁹

Although on the surface Durkheim's view seems to link ritual behavior to the supernatural realm, a closer look leads to a different conclusion. For Durkheim, worship of a god is the symbolic means by which people worship their own society, their own mutual dependency. Thus, the sacred ultimately refers not to a supernatural entity, but rather to people's emotionally charged interdependence, their societal arrangements. What is important about rituals, then, is not that they deal with supernatural beings, but rather that they provide a powerful way in which people's social dependence can be expressed.

I follow this perspective in defining ritual as symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive.³⁰ This is, in fact, the way in which many anthropologists now use the concept.³¹ In doing so, some have been at pains to distinguish between religious and secular ritual.³² I think, however, that such a distinction is more a hindrance than a help in understanding the importance of ritual in political life. I thus use the term *ritual* in the more general sense.³³

Characteristics of Ritual

Ritual action has a formal quality to it. It follows highly structured, standardized sequences and is often enacted at certain places and times that are themselves endowed with special symbolic meaning.³⁴ Ritual action is repetitive and, therefore, often redundant, but these very factors serve as important means of channeling emotion, guiding cognition, and organizing social groups.³⁵

I have defined ritual as action wrapped in a web of symbolism. Standardized, repetitive action lacking such symbolism is an example of habit or custom and not ritual.³⁶ Symbolization gives the action much more important meaning. Through ritual, beliefs about the universe come to be acquired, reinforced, and eventually changed. As Cassirer puts it: "Nature yields nothing without ceremonies." Ritual action not only gives meaning to the universe, it becomes part of the universe.³⁷ As one observer noted, "Through ritualized action, the inner becomes outer, and the subjective world picture becomes a social reality."³⁸

Ritual helps give meaning to our world in part by linking the past to

the present and the present to the future. This helps us cope with two human problems: building confidence in our sense of self by providing us with a sense of continuity—I am the same person today as I was twenty years ago and as I will be ten years from now—and giving us confidence that the world in which we live today is the same world we lived in before and the same world we will have to cope with in the future. "By stating enduring and underlying patterns," Myerhoff writes, "ritual connects past, present, and future, abrogating history and time."³⁹

One of the perennial problems people face is coping with the frustrating indeterminacy of the world. People respond by doing what they can to fix a single, known reality so that they can know what behavior is appropriate and so that they can understand their place in the world.⁴⁰ The very fixity and timelessness of ritual are reassuring parts of this attempt to tame time and define reality.

But even though there are certain psychological and even physiological bases of ritual, understanding its political importance depends on recognizing the ways ritual serves to link the individual to society.⁴¹ Through ritual the individual's subjective experience interacts with and is molded by social forces.⁴² Most often, people participate in ritual forms that they had nothing to do with creating. Even where individuals invent new rituals, they create them largely out of a stockpile of preexisting symbols, and the rituals become established not because of the psychic processes of the inventor but because of the social circumstances of the people who participate in the new rite.⁴³

The power of ritual, then, stems not just from its social matrix, but also from its psychological underpinnings. Indeed, these two dimensions are inextricably linked. Participation in ritual involves physiological stimuli, the arousal of emotions; ritual works through the senses to structure our sense of reality and our understanding of the world around us.⁴⁴

These psychological attributes are evident in another characteristic of ritual: its frequently dramatic character. Indeed, Arnold argued that people relate to the world through a series of dramatic productions:

Every individual, for reasons lying deep in the mystery of personality, constructs for himself a succession of little dramas in which he is the principal character. No one escapes the constant necessity of dressing himself in a series of different uniforms or silk hats, and watching himself go by.⁴⁵

Perhaps it is in this light that the proposal made by a local socialist newspaper at the end of the nineteenth century should be seen. It called for construction of a little platform along the line of march at Vienna's May Day demonstration so that marchers could step up momentarily to see the huge crowd of demonstrators of which they were a part.⁴⁶

Ritual provides one of the means by which people participate in such dramas and thus see themselves as playing certain roles. The dramatic quality of ritual does more than define roles, however, it also provokes an emotional response. Just as emotions are manipulated in the theater through the "varied stimuli of light, colour, gesture, movement, voice," so too these elements and others give rituals a means of generating powerful feelings.⁴⁷

Ritual dramas are widely found in politics.⁴⁸ In the United States, as elsewhere, election campaigns involve the staging of such dramas by candidates as well as the attempts to get the mass media to broadcast these dramatic productions into people's homes. Indeed, candidates often try to limit all contact with the public and the mass media that does not take place through carefully arranged dramatic productions, heavily laden with well-choreographed symbols.⁴⁹

Symbols provide the content of ritual; hence, the nature of these symbols and the ways they are used tell us much about the nature and influence of ritual. Three properties of symbols are especially important; condensation of meaning, multivocality, and ambiguity.

Condensation refers to the way in which individual symbols represent and unify a rich diversity of meanings. The symbol, whether verbal or iconic—that is, manifest in a physical form such as a bible or a flag—somehow embodies and brings together diverse ideas. At a subconscious, and hence more powerful, level, these various ideas are not just simultaneously elicited but also interact with one another so that they become associated together in the individual's mind.⁵⁰

Closely tied to the condensation of meaning in ritual symbols is their *multivocality*, the variety of different meanings attached to the same symbol. Where condensation refers to the interaction of these different meanings and their synthesis into a new meaning for an individual, multivocality suggests another aspect, the fact that the same symbol may be understood by different people in different ways. This trait is especially important in the use of ritual to build political solidarity in the absence of consensus.⁵¹

Given the properties of condensation and multivocality, it should hardly be surprising that ritual symbolism is often *ambiguous*: the symbol has no single precise meaning. Put in more positive terms, this means that symbols are not arcane ways of saying something that could be more precisely expressed in simple declarative form. The complexity and uncertainty of meaning of symbols are sources of their strength.⁵²

I have emphasized the fact that rituals have a standardized form and are presented to individuals by society rather than generated from individual psychological activity. But this does not mean that ritual is an

inherently conservative force. Rituals do change in form, in symbolic meaning, and in social effects; new rituals arise and old rituals fade away. These changes come through individual creative activity. People, in short, are not just slaves of ritual, or slaves of symbols, they are also molders and creators of ritual. It is because people create and alter rituals that they are such powerful tools of political action.⁵³

Yet even though ritual does have this creative potential, it also has a conservative bias. Ritual forms do tend to be slower to change than many other aspects of culture, as any student of Western religions knows. Indeed, their ability to give people a sense of continuity derives in good part from their constancy of form over time. The impact of a particular enactment of a ritual is a product of its past performances. Memories associated with those earlier ritual experiences color the experience of a new enactment of the rites.⁵⁴ Rites thus have both a conservative bias and innovative potential. Paradoxically, it is the very conservatism of ritual forms that can make ritual a potent force in political change.

The Political Importance of Ritual

According to mainstream Western ideology, ritual occupies at best a peripheral, if not irrelevant, role in political life. Serious political analysts, we are led to believe, would hardly waste their time by distracting attention from the real nitty-gritty of politics—interest groups, economic forces, and power relations—in order to turn a critical eye to ritual.⁵⁵

But this image of "political man" as a rational actor who carefully weighs his or her objective circumstances and decides on a course of action based on an instrumental calculation of self-interest leaves out culture and all that makes us human. Though we are rooted in the physical world and much affected by material forces, we perceive and evaluate them through our symbolic apparatus. We communicate through symbols, and one of the more important ways in which such symbolic understandings are communicated is through ritual. Mary Douglas puts this starkly: "Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them. For it is very possible to know something and then find words for it. But it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts."⁵⁶

Each society has its own mythology detailing its origins and sanctifying its norms. Some of these revolve around great men (in Western society female cultural heroes are less common), while others revolve around notable events that, whether having a historical basis or not, are defined through a web of symbolically constructed meaning. In the United States, children grow up learning about the Puritans, the Indians, the slaves, life

on the plantation, the melting pot, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Boone, John Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. Indeed, their conceptions of society are in good part based on understandings passed on through such symbols. They learn both what are the valued norms of conduct and what are the criteria of success. More to the point here, these symbols provide a way to understand such abstract political entities as the nation and a means (indeed the compulsion) of identifying with them. Lance Bennet, a political scientist, observes:

Myths condition the public to the powerful symbols used by politicians. Myths underwrite the status quo in times of stability and they chart the course of change in times of stress. In the day-to-day business of politics myths set the terms for most public policy debate. When mythical themes and myth-related language are stripped away from policy discourse, very little of substance remains. Most political controversy centers around disagreement over which myth to apply to a particular problem.⁵⁷

Ritual practices are a major means for propagating these political myths. The symbols at the heart of ritual observances are part of the tissue of myth that helps structure an understanding of the political world and the public's attitude to the various political actors that populate it.

Once constructed, such symbolic understandings of the political order are resistant (though not immune) to change. Here again, there is a conflict between the view of humans as rational actors and a view that stresses a more complex interaction of the symbolic with the material. In the former view, changing a person's political opinion is a matter of logical argumentation and the marshaling of facts. But the resistance of beliefs to change through such rational debate has long been recognized. In China many centuries ago, Chuang Tzu wrote: "Suppose I am arguing with you and you get the better of me. Does the fact that I am not a match for you mean that you are really right and I am really wrong? Or if I get the better of you, does the fact that you are not a match for me mean that I am really right and you are really wrong?"⁵⁸

The Confucian philosophers understood the importance of ritual for efficient government. People's behavior, they realized, is not a simple product of consciously weighing options, but rather takes shape through the rituals in which they take part. Rulers should always avoid giving commands, opined one of these philosophers, for commands, being direct and verbal, always bring to the subject's mind the possibility of doing the opposite. He continued:

But since rituals are non-verbal, they have no contraries. They can therefore be used to produce harmony of wills and actions without provoking re-

calcitance; if a man finds himself playing his appointed part in *it* [ritual] and thus already—as it were *de facto*—in harmony with others, it no more occurs to him than it occurs to a dancer to move to a different rhythm than that being played by the orchestra.⁵⁹

Not only does ritual have this cognitive effect on people's definition of political reality, it also has an important emotional impact. People derive a great deal of satisfaction from their participation in ritual. Rulers have for millennia (indeed, for as long as there have been rulers) attempted to design and employ rituals to arouse popular emotions in support of their legitimacy and to drum up popular enthusiasm for their policies. But, by the same token, rituals are also important for revolutionary groups who must elicit powerful emotions to mobilize the people for revolt. Trotsky recognized the need for such ritual forms in the early years of the Soviet state. He was especially disturbed by the church monopoly on everyday rites, arguing that "rationalistic" appeals to the masses were not sufficient. We must recognize, Trotsky insisted, "man's desire for the theatrical," his "strong and legitimate need for an outer manifestation of emotions."⁶⁰

To explain the political importance of ritual I consider in the next four chapters how political ritual works: how ritual helps build political organizations; how ritual is employed to create political legitimacy; how ritual helps create political solidarity in the absence of political consensus; and, how ritual molds people's understandings of the political universe. I then examine how political competitors struggle for power through ritual, how ritual is employed in both defusing and inciting political conflict, and how ritual serves revolution and revolutionary regimes. Finally, I ask what all this has to do with the nature of political life. How important is ritual in politics today?

2

Flaming Crosses and Body Snatchers

With a half moon lighting their path, two thousand Georgians puffed their way to the treeless plateau on top of Stone Mountain. They had come in hopes of witnessing a dramatic ceremony, and they would not be disappointed. Up the side of the mountain came the Grand Dragon, in his rich green robe, leading seven hundred white-hooded figures, their sheets reaching the ground. Beyond them marched hundreds of other men, their uncovered heads and dark suits in stark contrast to the white masks and white robes that preceded them. The initiates marched in lock step, single file, each man's arms on the shoulders of the man in front, in a style recalling the old Georgia chain gangs. In the eerie light of the towering flaming cross—three hundred feet tall and two hundred wide—the initiates kneeled and bowed their heads before two white knights, one bearing a cross, the other an American flag. They repeated the oath by which Klansmen were made: "I most solemnly swear that I will forever keep sacredly secret the signs, words and grip and any and all other matters and knowledge of the Klan. . . . I will die rather than divulge same, so help me God." It was May 9, 1946. The ceremonies had been postponed many times, leaders explained, because of the wartime shortage of sheets.¹

No organization—whether Ku Klux Klan or General Motors—can exist without symbolic representation, for organizations can be "seen" only through their associated symbols.² Indeed, people tend to think of organizations as physical units, part of the material world. Ritual is one of the important means by which these views of organizations are constructed