

**Thomassen, Bjørn. 2014. *Liminality and the Modern. Living Through the In-Between*. Surrey, Burlington: Ashgate. xi+250 pp. Hb.: £65.00. ISBN: 9781409460800.**

This book is an attempt to introduce “liminality” as an anthropological concept which can be used by social sciences in order to understand the world in which we live. This is an ambitious theoretical exercise, which involves both building the concept of “liminality” and to propose its application to concrete examples. Borrowed from the work of Arnold van Gennep on the rites of passage (1909), the concept of “liminality” is understood as a rupture or suspension of ordinary structures, a time and a place out of the ordinary in which individuals or collectives must invent new forms of action or thought, which then become recognised permanently. It is ‘the loss of taken-for-granted structures’ (p. 113). The author’s thesis is that the current period can be characterised by the widespread and permanent character of liminality: rupture and inventiveness become the norm, to the detriment of the “re-aggregation” phase, identified by van Gennep as the last phase of rites of passage.

The book cannot, however, be reduced to this thesis, which, formulated in its simplest form, may seem schematic. On the contrary, each chapter offers many stimulating perspectives in various fields such as the history of French sociology, the political philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, bungee jumping or political revolutions. These chapters are organised into two parts: the first offers an intellectual genealogy of the concept of liminality, in order to reveal its contours and operational value, while the second offers a number of applications of this concept to objects related to different periods and scale levels.

The first two chapters are thus dedicated to the figure and work of Arnold van Gennep, considered the inventor of the concept of liminality. Without producing new materials about the life and work of van Gennep, Bjorn Thomassen nevertheless brings new light to his scientific project and his relations with sociologists of the time. His marginal position is thus presented as the result of strong opposition to Durkheim (both were concerned with the anthropology of religion), the latter managing to impose his views in academic institutions, while the former gave up a career as an anthropologist or sociologist and turned to the study of folklore.

The third chapter shows how the work of van Gennep on rites of passage was rediscovered much later and found continuation in the work of Victor Turner starting from the 1960s. According to Turner, the concept of liminality is not only a part of the ternary structure of rites of passage. It should also be applied to various situations and in particular to those that constitute “social drama” in which the ordinary course of life is suspended. Thomassen rejects the notion of “liminoid” forged by Turner to talk about artistic or recreational activities that take place on the sidelines of daily life (liminality must be limited to changes in state or status). He nevertheless emphasises the strength of an approach which sought to extend the validity of liminality beyond the study of rituals.

The fourth chapter provides some principles for this extended use of the concept of liminality. Several types of liminality are identified according to the different types of subjecthood they involved (single individuals, social groups, whole societies), to their

temporal dimension (moments, periods, epochs) and to their spatial dimension (specific places, areas or zones, countries or larger regions). Connected concepts are also presented, such as imitation (with a discussion of Kierkegaard, Tarde, and Girard), trickster figure or schismogenesis (borrowed from Bateson).

The second part opens with a chapter presenting the seventeenth century as a liminal period from which early modernity emerged. Through an examination of personal experiences and of their impact on the thought of Descartes and Hobbes, the author shows how the period was experienced as a ‘total collapse of order’, an age ‘in desperate search for new ordering principles’, a ‘liminal age’ (p. 113). New ways of conceiving the individual (Descartes) and the state (Hobbes) appeared as an answer to this liminal situation and then spread in European societies. Again, the aim of the discussion is less to offer an innovative reading of seventeenth-century philosophers than to bring together modern readings emphasising the notion of liminality. The following chapter draws a parallel between the appearance of the first casinos in Venice in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the contemporary craze for games, including gambling in contemporary Italy and beyond.

The seventh chapter provides a comparison of rituals reported in various parts of the world, which have in common to include jumps into the void from a platform. The popular and commercial practice of Western bungee jumping, inspired by Melanesian practices, is a modern and de-ritualised version of these jumps. Drawing on Caillois and Turner, Thomassen characterises these jumping activities as liminal and argue that they serve as a metaphor for understanding liminality in contemporary culture and leisure.

The last chapter is finally a reading of political revolutions in terms of liminality. It argues that anthropologists should not leave the study of revolutions to political scientists (following Mauss whose text on the Bolshevik revolution is commented) and that an ethnography of revolution can benefit from a processual approach inspired by the work of Victor Turner. Political revolutions are seen here as ‘clear-cut liminal situations in large-scale settings’ (p. 201) and resemble rituals, especially as they appropriate ‘public squares as their ritual stage’ (p. 207).

The conclusion offers other possible fields of application, especially in the sphere of economics, and ends with a discussion of “home” as the possibility of re-aggregation in a period of widespread liminality.

At the intersection of anthropology, philosophy, and political sociology, the book draws on an impressive body of literature and demonstrates the great erudition of the author. There is no fieldwork as such, the ethnographical part is reduced to scattered observations on Italy, where the author lived, and the commentaries on philosophical and anthropological works are to a large extent second hand. The book is, however, a challenging proposal for an anthropological reading of modernity and social change. It calls in particular to reconsider periods of “transition” as liminal phases in which individuals, in a recursive work between experience and thought, invent new forms of living together.

GILLES DE RAPPER  
CNRS, Idemec (France)