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SIFTING THROUGH TRANSITION: REVISITING 'RITES OF PASSAGE'

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Abstract

Planning research frequently deals with issues of transition. Transition is defined here broadly as the change of social and spatial state from the one position into another. In planning theory and urban studies, there are many attempts to conceptualise such processes of change (material theories, evolutionary approaches, pragmatic perspectives, and so on). This paper traces some classic sources of functional anthropology and cultural sociology, focusing particularly on the meaning of the 'rite of passage'. This line of reasoning contemplates transition as a pattern of cultural change of social order, and deals both with the structural and the process oriented aspects of transition. The paper builds upon the pivotal work of the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and the further explorations of Victor Turner as well as present-day interpretations.

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Introduction

Planning studies, inherently, deal with processes of social and spatial change. In the most voluptuous perceptions, it is the planner who moves the wheels of transition but as John Friedmann recognised almost fifty years ago, social change goes through its own transformation (Friedmann, 1973): it is not likely that a social system will be transferred to a new state from an external position. If a planner aims to be an active part of such complex social processes, it is crucial first to understand the why and how of social change. This is a deep challenge for planning studies, which can never be achieved completely. Personally, I believe, the best way to proceed is to follow the starting points of different paradigms and to stimulate the accumulation of findings. Some follow the inferences of historic materialism, unravelling the macroscopic determinants of power and capital on social change. Others follow evolutionary premises of how states of social interaction learn and adapt under changing conditions. Complexity theory doubts whether we will be able to understand social change at all; its corollary is grounded in probabilism. Other planning approaches take situational and experimental trajectories of discovery, such as those outlined in pragmatism. There are many relevant ways to frame the drives and mechanisms of social change, and they all deeply impact on the way planning studies are conceptualised.

One of the relevant frameworks concerns the cultural perspective of social change, and addresses the meaningful terms of interpretation. This is widely investigated in anthropology and cultural sociology but appears to be less explored within planning discourses. Investigating social change as a cultural transition introduces a particular way to inspect. A cultural gaze introduces the meaning of a social state. Framed with a cultural lens, social transition is not just a process of moving from the one state to another under the instigation of personal motives or external incentives. Rather, it implies the transgression of a state of social meaning. This state of social meaning includes a public representation, ritualisation and often also ceremonies, that make a particular state socially important and require particular trajectories in cases of their change. In the words of Catharine Bell:

> Ritual is the means by which individual perception and behaviour are socially appropriated or conditioned. It links the collective representations of social life (as a meta-mental category and individual experience and behaviour (as a category of action (Bell, 1992, p.20).

Its function is to distinguish the social meaning of particular states from more quotidian activities. It fulfils this social function in contemporary societies as well as in tribal communities. Ritualisation is a cultural strategy for setting some activities off from others, it is fundamentally 'a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and the associations that they engender are special' (Bell, 1992, p.220). Certain features, such as formality, fixity and repetition appear to be crucial in these processes of social differentiation (Bell, 1992, p.91).

The impact of cultural strategies on the differentiation of social states and spaces may explain the high relevance of cultural strategies to planning. They might reveal at least a part of the magic box of social change. This paper explores the evolution of a classic conceptual framework in anthropology to explain cultural processes of transition: the rites of passage, introduced one hundred years ago by the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1908). He contemplated transition to be a pattern of cultural change of social order, and dealt both with the structural and the process oriented aspects of transition. The paper leads from this pivotal work to the further explorations by Victor Turner (fifty years later) and to present day interpretations. In the concluding part of the paper, I discuss some relevant building blocks for planning theory.

Arnold van Gennep: 'Rite de passage'

In the life of individuals and groups there are always new thresholds to cross. Each society displays differences between individuals, groups and subgroups. Moving from a group to another requires one to fulfil certain conditions (education, language, apprenticeships, and so on). Critical changes in social life and spatial organisation are conveyed by ceremonies which contain a diverse set of rites. Examples include those ceremonies that convey the regular stages of a lifetime, such as birth, social puberty, betrothal and marriage,

and death; other ceremonies are related to the crossing of territorial borders; others concern the changes of season in nature and the involved social and economic impacts of fertility and harvesting; still further relate to border crossing of social states and groups, such as the social movements in educational or professional life. At the start of the twentieth century, anthropologists were investigating these ceremonial changes in social life in different cultures. They used to analyse ceremonial acts as separate happenings, not seldom conceptualising them as folkloristic acts or mysteries. The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep was the first to recognise a general pattern behind these ceremonies. He recognised that 'beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rite of passage* (Gennep, 1960, p.191). It is essential for rites of passage that the underlying arrangement is always the same: 'The rites of preliminary or permanent separation, transition, and incorporation are placed in relation to one another for a specific purpose' (Gennep, 1960, p.191). The consequent search for purpose and cohesion within different ceremonies made him one of the precursors of functional anthropology (Kimbali, 1960). Van Gennep investigated all ceremonies that conveyed a passage: those that guide the *separation* of a given social state, those regarding the stage of *transition* and those enabling *incorporation* in a new social state. Individuals and groups pass though stages, traversing several boundaries. He recognised that not all ceremonies in life are characterised by this pattern of passage, that the use of ceremonies may be asymmetric in different stages of a passage, and that the local uses of ceremonies, rites and symbolic acts differ highly across time and space. Yet, the search for integral patterns of passage provided a hold to explore comprehensive and coherent processes of change. Increasing specialisation in complex societies may lead to a subdivision of the three stages in autonomous steps, for instance autonomous transition ceremonies (such as the novitiate and the betrothal). It is the 'concept of transition that provides an orientation for understanding the intricacies and the order of rites preliminary to marriage' (Gennep, 1960, p.192).

Based on these foundations, van Gennep made a classification of rites. In keeping with many anthropological researchers of his time, he was most interested in magico-religious rites, combining religious views with the use of magic that comprised techniques (ceremonies, rites, and services). Religious theories are distinguished in dynamistic and animist views. Dynamistic views are based on external monistic and impersonal powers while animist views are based on personalism and reciprocity amongst the believers. However, van Gennep did not consider the religious dimension as a necessary condition; his classification extended to ritual practices in secular contexts. He further distinguished sympathetic (reciprocal) and contagious rites; positive (adulation) and negative rites (taboos, prohibits, do not and do); and finally direct and indirectly working rites (transmitted with the help of a carrier, such as an arrow shoot in the air and directed by the gods to the heart of the enemy) (Gennep, 1960, p.3). Ceremonies always consist of a combination of several rites, for instance they do not exist of just taboos. Considering them in isolation 'would remove them from a context which gives them meaning in a dynamic whole' (Gennep, 1960, p.89). Their function is to convey individuals or groups through the passage of separation from existing social states, the process of transition, and incorporation into new social states. Getting married means that you have to separate from parental dependence first, traverse through a stage of transition, and then become incorporated into a new social state; marriage. Giving birth to a child would start a new cycle of passage, first the separating the pregnant woman from the rest of society, next the rites of pregnancy itself (the transition), and then the rites of childbirth and reintegrating into society as a mother (Gennep, 1960, p.41). Such passages are conveyed by various rites. Famous are the ceremonies of entrance: 'The novice is first separated from his previous environment, in relation to which he is dead, in order to be incorporated into his new one' (Gennep, 1960, p.81). He is first taken into the forest (here seclusion takes place, or intoxication with palm wine), then come the transition rites (bodily changes or paintings), and next the incorporation (the initiate pretends not to know how to walk or to eat, he must learn all gestures of the ordinary life) (Gennep, 1960, p.81). The rites make this traversing of borders a passage through a 'sacred' world, grading up the novice into a new state. Van Gennep distinguished the sacred and the profane in order to understand the stages of transition. This 'sacred' is not necessarily religious, it represents the cultural function of ritualising as a means to make a difference with ordinary life: 'The person who enters a status at variance with the one previously held becomes "sacred" to the others who remain in the "profane" state (Kimbali, 1960, p.viii). Van Gennep explained this transition as following:

> The idea is that a person is lifted. Rites may be used to show that at a moment of transition the individual does not belong to the profane nor to the sacred. Or if he does belong to one of the two that he intends to move to the other, and he is therefore isolated and maintained in an intermediate position, held between heaven and earth (…).The various rites of appropriation, which include the imposition and lifting of taboos, and so forth, and whose purpose is to remove

> a person from the common domain in order to incorporate him into a special domain, also include essential elements of the pattern (van Gennep, 1960, p.186).

Van Gennep was particularly interested in territorial passages. Territorial borders are marked by landmarks with rites of consecration. Frequently, there are prohibits or conditions (cultural, political, legal, or economic formalities) to enter a territory. The territory is sacred. Passing a border means entering a symbolic and spatial area of transition (van Gennep, 1960, p.18). In magico-religious passages, ceremonial transitions of frontier crossings are embedded in rites of separation (sacrificing a bull to Zeus, washing of hands, and so on) and rites of incorporation (such as joined meals, union events, or obligating rites of socially binding via gifts, such as widely investigated by Marcel Mauss, 1954): 'crossing the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world' (van Gennep, 1960, p.20). To underline the relevance of territorial passages van Gennep emphasised the 'limen' (Latin for: the threshold). He calls

> the rites of separation from a previous world, preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world post-liminal rites (p.21).

The territorial passage is often made a part of social passages: moving from one social state to another (consecrating the passage in embarking and debarking rituals of travelling; spatial separation as part of the ceremonial passages in marriages; consecrating victory by passing a special *arc de triomphe*; separating social categories; changing residence to profile your new social state, and so forth) (van Gennep, 1960, p.191).

Victor Turner: Liminality

Fifty years after van Gennep, Victor Turner revisited the concept of the rite of passage. He was interested, particularly, in the ambiguous stage of transition, called 'liminality'. Liminality is the unstructured space in-between settled states of social structure. The characteristics of the liminal ritual subjects are ambiguous, they do not correspond to the attributes of the past or to coming social states. The generalised bonds of social structure have ceased to be, and are fragmented into a multiplicity of social ties in this transitional stage (Turner, 1967, p.94). In liminal stages, individuals or groups slip through the network of classification that normally locate social states, or social positions in cultural place: 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial' (Turner, 1977, p.95; Turner, 1967).

Turner generalised the ambiguity of liminality by introducing two general modalities of social relationships: social structure and community (Turner, 1977, p.131) (he mentioned 'communitas' instead of 'community' to avoid area-based definitions of community but - in this paper - I stick to the wider meaning of social community). Both modalities are needed in social life to enable social relationships, according to Turner. He was particularly interested in the dialectic between these two dimensions of social relationships. He distinguished social structure and community in a spatio-temporal sense by identifying social structure as 'durable' social relationships, and by situating community in the 'temporal and situational' in-between stages of transition. More generally, he distinguished the different nature of the two concepts. Social structure differentiates the positions and roles of individuals and groups: their position and behaviour are tied to rules and customs (implying differences of status and social hierarchy, distinctions of wealth and property, distinctions of social position, rights and obligations, and so on). The modality of community is completely different, it consists of relationships between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals (Turner, 1967, p.131). These individuals are not bounded by position or social state but interact spontaneously as equals without distinction of rank, hierarchy, or property. It may not surprise that - within this framework - community is identified with times of change, becoming explosive or potentially powerful, particularly in times when ties of social structure are considered as too densely tightened.

Turner emphasises the dialectical relationships of community and social structure in social life, containing successive experiences of high and low (Turner, 1967, p.97). The research into the dialectics of hierarchy and humility is fascinating. In liminal processes, the norms and values that govern public processes are peripheral

to normative expectations of social structure. Turner distinguishes rituals of 'status elevation' that convey ritual persons to a higher status and rituals of 'status reversal' (Turner, 1967, p.166); in rituals of status reversal, persons or groups of low status are encouraged to exercise ritual authority temporarily over their superiors (it is expected that the latter will accept this ritual degradation). The symbols of liminality often indicate the structural invisibility of the ritual subjects (such as in noviciate) Turner, 1967, p.170). The aim is not to discipline obedience but to bring the superiors to primary human nature below the accepted status forms: 'the implication is that for an individual to go higher on the ladder, he must go lower than the status ladder (Turner, 1967, p.170). Turner describes cases of throning in which the new leader of a community has to first undergo a process of being humiliated by the community before being seated on the throne with the full respect of the same community. Throning is a sort of purification ceremony which, whilst paying tribute to the public character of the office also enables ordinary people to taunt the new leader before he is upgraded to the power of office. The liminal rites of status reversal do not destroy social structures but reflect a dialectic of social structure and liminal community. As Turner explains, 'By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle (they underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictive behaviour between various estates of society' (p.176). Social structure and its innovation cannot exist without relaxing the reins: 'The gaps between the positions, the interstices, are necessary to the structure' (Turner, 1967, p.201).

In this perspective, the unbounded process of community leads, at the end, to a new state of social structure, the transitional stage of structure-less community is not a 'durable state'. Turner analysed liminality as a process of community, a stepping stone to new social structure. He discussed well known experimental processes of community that start as a contestation against a given state of social structure but simultaneously contain the germs of a new social structure. St Francis, for instance, started a process of community, he refrained from all social hierarchy, property, or status and deliberately decided to live in poverty and wanted to keep his fellow-men in a permanent state of liminality – whereby they did not accept gifts, property, or even their own settlements (Turner, 1967, p.147). However, the movement of Francis grew, and after his death the conventionists were embedded in the organisational networks and hierarchy of the catholic church. Apparently, community was a stage of transition and a new structure was needed to survive through time (Turner, 1967, p.150).

Bourdieu: Rites of Institution

The classic sources of rites of passage are contemporary theories of social differentiation and social change. The initial emphasis on the religious foundation of rites of passage has been replaced by theological disciplines, whilst the discovery of the meaning of rites in social life has been enlarged through social scientific studies of social differentiation and social change. Van Gennep indicated the wider social function of rites of passage in society but did not empirically investigate these social functions in depth. The pioneer of the sociology of social distinctions, Pierre Bourdieu, made this step. He focused on 'the *social* function of ritual and the social significance of the boundaries or limits which the ritual allows one to pass over or to transgress in a lawful way' (Bourdieu, 1991, p.117). He was not interested in the phases of ritual as such, but gave more attention to the difference between those who pass the rites and those who do not. The rites are there to draw and mark a line between two social states. In this perception, the liminal rites of social relationships institute a lasting difference between groups and social states. For this reason, Bourdieu replaced the focus of research from rites of passage to *rites of institution*, and through so doing consecrated the differences of order of social relations (Bourdieu, 1991, p.117).

Bourdieu's framing of rites of institution recalls the (almost forgotten) conceptual distinction that van Gennep made between the 'sacred and the profane', which were noted in the first section of this paper. The ceremonies, rites and symbols canonise the differences of social state: stepping into the new state is made sacred in comparison to the profane. Bourdieu suggests that rites of institution

> tend to consecrate or to legitimate an *arbitrary boundary*, by fostering a misrecognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate; or, what amounts to the same thing, they tend to involve a solemn transgression (Bourdieu, 1991, p.118).

A boundary between social states might be arbitrary or ambiguous but it is made straight by culturally and symbolically enlarging the line. By solemnly marking the transgression, the spectator observes the passage

but – according to Bourdieu - the border is actually consecrated. The rite of institution consecrates and legitimates social differences. The instituting of social differences is a strong cultural and social power. One might think that it makes no sense to mark the differences because they already exist. Bourdieu claims that social differences are often ambiguous and that subjects do not always realise their own social position. Rites of institution mark the differences of social order, they encourage you to 'become what you are' (Bourdieu, 1991, p.122). They constitute social order by making social borders known and enable them to become recognised in front of everyone. Their symbolic effectiveness is achieved, first, by demarcating the objective difference (you are a professional, a doctor and so on, or not), and secondly, because the community acts upon your status. The effectiveness is even deepened because individuals tend to act upon the image that the given community holds of him because of the professional status (Bourdieu, 1991, p.117).

The active constituting of rites to mark differences of social order is an essential part of Bourdieu's framework of cultural institutions. It is a permanent process of active reproduction and social normalisation. Rites contribute to the institutionalising of new meanings and shape what is considered normal, such as in the case of household food rituals that shape the meaning that households confer upon food and food waste (Pineda Revilla and Salet, forthcoming 2018). The social and cultural power that is invested via ceremonies, rites, and symbols is obviously not just a policy instrument of politicians and planners. In order to become real and effective, it must be recognised and authorised by the community (reflecting interactions with sets of dispositions and champs of capital) (Thompson, 1991, p.14).

Discussion

Planning studies often deal with issues of social and spatial transition. The aim of this paper is simply to recall a particular line of cultural analysis (may be also a bit as antidote to the overemphasis of organisational change in planning studies) and to discuss some symbolic-cultural building blocks of research on social transition, mediating between structure and process. I could only deal in brief overview with some of the classic sources but I hope it makes visible the rich conceptual and empirical tradition of *rites of passage*. Van Gennep's rites of passage socially enlarge the different stages of transition (separation, transition and incorporation), making sense of the thresholds of border crossing; playing with the dialectic social and spatial distances and passages of the marginal 'profane' and the 'sacred'; as well as the territorial shifts of pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases. Turner focused on the unbounded nature of liminality and raised community as a dialectic counterpart of structure in social relationships. It enabled him to conceptualise the dialectic interaction of hierarchy and humility, of status elevation and status reversal. Bourdieu stipulated the social function of rites, labelling these as rites of institution. His rites of institution mark and consecrate the differences of social order. These concepts of order and community, and in particular the weighted processes of change, are still relevant building blocks to enrich and deepen the studies of social and spatial transition today.

The classic sources, obviously, have not been delivered uncontested. Van Gennep focused on the phases of transition from one fixed layer of social structure to another. His cultural analysis of limines and transitional passages goes deep but today we know that the pillars of social structure are all but fixed certainties. Social structure is not evident, upholding social structure is a permanent challenge for a society, and moving from one set of social states to the next is usually not moving toward something that is already known. Rather it is matter of creating social order for unknown futures. Turner focused on the interstices of liminality. The emphasis of his conceptual framework is on community as a temporal and essential counterpart of structured order. However, he is not precise in defining the liminal transitions, they might take a lifetime. More generally, Turner tended to overstretch his concept of community. His demarcation is so wide that it does not promote a focused analysis. He is also criticised for idealising the processes of community. He did not stick to his abstract definition of idiosyncratic, concrete, and situational action but tended to idealise community in an almost utopian sense of social relationships (harmonious relationships of equals, without hierarchy, distinction, property, and so forth.). Yet, he very convincingly demonstrated that besides the structured layer of social order there is an important anti-structure layer in social relationships, a layer of direct and spontaneous action prone to social innovation. He limited this liminality to interstices of social structure but today many observers believe that it is a permanent and vibrant dimension of social relationships. In the present epoch it even seems to get more systematic attention than orders of social structure.

In his seminal work on 'The Secular Age' Taylor makes some interesting observations that I wish to borrow to conclude this paper. Reflecting on Turner's dialectic he notes: 'It incorporates some sense of the complementarity, the mutual necessity of opposites, that is, of states which are antithetical, can't be lived at the same time' (Taylor, 2007, p.47). I would like to add 'yet the antithetical contrast cannot avoid be lived at the same time'. Taylor continues:

> All they have in common is that they postulate a world, and underlying this perhaps a cosmos, in which order needs chaos, in which we have to give place to contradictory principles (Taylor, 2007, p.47).
>
> There is a play of structure and anti-structure, code and anti-code; this either takes the form of the code's being momentarily suspended or transgressed; or else, (…) the code itself allows for a counter-principle to the dominant source of power; it opens space for a complementary "power of the weak". It's as though there were a felt need to complement the structure of power with its opposite (Taylor, 2007, p.48-49).

In breaking us out of coded roles, it also does a number of other things besides releasing fellowship. It also sets free our spontaneity and creativity. It allows free reign to the imagination (Taylor, 2007, p.50).

Exploring relevance for planning

What is the significance of this cultural institutional exploration for planning studies? As outlined in the introduction of the paper, planning studies rarely explore the potential of cultural explanation in depth. Communicative planning approaches love to fabricate symbolic frameworks of change, usually with the planning subject in the catalytic role of mobilising change. However, investigating the meaning of underlying cultural order does not so often occur. A white raven is in Seymour Mandelbaum's *Open Moral Communities* (2000). Mandelbaum identified several communities as social settings of moral order and investigated how communitarian sensibility selects, disciplines and shapes meaningful frameworks (including myths) as effective carriers of cultural power. Investigating cultural meanings is not a simple challenge, it is difficult to ground empirical findings. A highly relevant theme for cultural planning research is the search of the meaning of *place*, such as Patsy Healey's interesting conception of 'relational place' (Healey, 2004, and 2007). Healey analyses place in a dynamic way and suggests that it is made up of 'multiple webs of relations that transect and intersect across an urban area' (Healey, 2004). Elaborating further on this relational concept of place through cultural lenses, such as indicatively outlined in this paper, would raise additional questions, such as why certain of these place relationships have been made more important than other relationships; why some of these relationships have developed into pillars of cultural order, and how such social importance has been brought forward. The cultural perspective enables one to investigate the differentiation of social relationships. The noted questions are very relevant because the answers to them may contain some keys to the particular trajectories that would be needed to enable a successful transition of existing cultural relationships of place. A transition of 'cultural place' is not evident. A cultural understanding of 'place' may learn why and how subjects have attached particular meaning to spaces. They have deliberately made it important in particular ways (rituals, ceremonies, symbols), in their mutual contacts, and by reproducing such particular cultural meanings in practice. Thus, a transition of this attached cultural meaning would require particular efforts and trajectories. Analysing the concept of cultural place as a 'rite of passage' might be helpful in selectively refining the lenses of discovery.

In my own work, I focus on the interaction of institutions and the purpose strategies of action. In my view, the potential of planning has to be discovered in the dialectic of public norms (institutions) and purposive aspirations (Salet, 2018a, Salet, 2018b). These dialectical relationships may be social, political, legal, economic, and - obviously - cultural. The cultural relationships in the intersection of institutions and purposive strategies of action are not intensely studied but I feel that there is a fascinating agenda here waiting for further exploration. For instance, when this perspective is applied to analyse the major issues of urban transition. For urbanists and planners it has been evident for almost two decades that the hierarchical concepts of the compact city no longer matches reality in the current stage of urbanisation. The urban complex has aggrandised and has been widely segmented into fragments of urban spaces. Planners and urbanists fully understand the urgency of upgrading this spread-out urban fragility to a new network-type quality of spatial organisation at a regional

level (facing the challenges of climate and the increasing social polarisation of living conditions). However, the practices of this transition agenda appear to be extremely arduous, and sometimes even slide back to the hierarchical concepts of the previous stage of urbanisation. It sometimes feels as if local policies are preparing for the last war. Urban transition, apparently, struggles with a problem of cognitive dissonance. How can we understand this arduous transition and find keys for more productive change? Social, political, legal, and/or economic explanations cannot completely explain this gap between public morality and public action; partly for this reason, they do not yet provide the clues for a more successful transition. Could it be, that defining urban transition as a cultural rite of passage and exploring the why and how of the lasting importance and dominance of the traditional meaning of place and urbanisation might provide additional knowledge and more sensibility for the cultural conditions of 'separation, transition and new incorporation' of this arduous urban challenge? Communicative planning strategies bring creativity, imagination and promising future frameworks to urban transition. Yet, would these communicative planning strategies not become a bit more effective when exploring a productive match with underlying flows of cultural order?

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