Review Essay

Ritual Studies and Ritual Theories: A Guide for the Perplexed

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Birds do it. Bees do it. Rituals are common in nature. In our own lineage rituals runs rampant. Why this is so, and how best to examine human rituals, remains some of the most intriguing and contested questions facing scholarly inquiry.

The editors of this impressive collection of 35 articles (plus preface and epilogue) survey a range of contemporary and classic perspectives. In my view, the book succeeds in its aim to limn the major theoretical initiatives in this increasingly prominent interdisciplinary field. A handful of chapters in this book are of poor quality — opaque, verbose, inconsistent or uninformative. Culling these would have strengthened the volume. Moreover there are significant omissions. For example, there are no chapters devoted to rational choice theory, arguably one of the most important theoretical innovations in the past forty years. Only one chapter mentions evolutionary biology (Dorthea Baudy’s “Ethology,” 345–350). And though thought-provoking, Baudy nevertheless fails to engage with the latest in evolutionary theory (for example signalling theory and group selection [Irons 2001; Sosis 2004; Wilson 2002]). Yet I do not wish to overstate the book’s shortcomings. These are relatively minor. Moreover on the heels of this volume the editors have published an annotated bibliography with over 400 references to recent work in the
field (see below for bibliographic details.) Yet even without its companion, there is enough excellent material in this 777-page collection to make it well worth a careful reading.

The first of five major sections of the book cover “Methodological and Meta-theoretical Issues.” The term “Meta-theoretical” will appear doubly worrying to those already allergic to “theory.” This worry is misplaced. The editors could equally have used the less daunting and more descriptive “foundational questions.” Indeed, my hunch is that the opening section will prove most appealing to those most sceptical of theoretical discourse. For irrespective of your taste for theory the most empirically interesting materials appear in Chapter 4: “Ritual”: a lexicographic survey of some related terms from an emic perspective” (37–100.) Here, Michael Stausberg (an editor) raises the question of whether analogues to the term “ritual” can be found outside the scholarly world. This is an important question. As Stausberg notices, “the modern theoretical discourse about ‘rituals’ tacitly starts from the premise that ‘rituals’ can be found in each and every society, culture, and religion” (52). We begin by assuming the term refers to something definite in the world? Yet what if the term is purely an artefact of academic discourse? For Stausberg, “An analysis of... the very mechanisms of constructing ‘ritual’... could help to move beyond the Euro-American legacy of discourse about ritual” (53). Crucially, the phrase “move beyond” remains ambiguous. For placing “ritual” on all fours with a much wider cultural-linguistic context exposes it to improvement — that context might refine it. But it also exposes it to the gallows. There is no guarantee that we will want to keep “ritual” as a theoretical concept if it proves arbitrary.

Eighteen languages, living and dead, are surveyed in this chapter, ranging from Akkadian, to Chinese to Arabic to Old Norse to Greek and beyond. The verdict? It turns out that most languages have a multiplicity of terms to describe what scholars lump together under “ritual.” In some languages, for example, Sanskrit, that number ranges into the hundreds or thousands. Moreover, even where aggregate concepts can be found — the Hopis for example adjust their suffixes to restrict or generalize the range of terms over a set of practices — there seems to be no instance of any naturally occurring expression approximating the meaning of the scholarly term “ritual,” except of course where the language in question is populated with academics. Indeed, Armin Geertz