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Structure and Communitas: The Affirmation
and Negation of Race, Class, and Social Status in Southern College Football
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The anthropologist Victor Turner argues that there is a fundamental tension in any society between structure and communitas. Structure is “a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social position and/or actors which they imply.”¹ Structure assigns to each individual a particular identity or role. These identities or roles entail certain responsibilities and an understanding of the relations between identities and roles. For example, among other identities and roles I am a father, teacher, and scholar. I also am a white male of the middle class. These identities and roles bear responsibilities that contribute to the construction of an intricate structure that shapes my self-consciousness and governs (even if loosely) my behavior—including my interactions with others.

But my society also has certain moments, usually achieved through emotionally powerful and meaningful rituals, which enable us to achieve communitas. Communitas “breaks in . . . at the edges of structure . . . It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy,’ possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.”² Communitas is the occasional abandonment of structure for a powerful experience of direct, egalitarian encounter with others. It refers to the direct confrontation of concrete, particular individuals with one another. This confrontation is not between, for

¹ Turner, Victor, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 272.

² Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995), 128.

example, a teacher and a student or a clerk and a customer, it is between two human beings stripped of their identities and roles in society.³

All human societies seem to need some kind of division of labor, clearly understood power relations and duties for its citizens, and orderly and effective social institutions with accompanying hierarchies. All of this is structure, and allows societies to function effectively. The “spontaneity and immediacy” of *communitas* inevitably gives way to structure.⁴ But it is *communitas* that provides the powerful emotional bond to one another that human beings need as social creatures. What we have then is a continual tension, a dialectic, between *communitas* and structure. Both are necessary for human life, and our objective should be finding the appropriate balance between the two. Turner concludes:

Spontaneous *communitas* is richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones. Life in “structure” is filled with objective difficulties: decisions have to be made, inclinations sacrificed to the wishes and needs of the group, and physical and social obstacles overcome at some personal cost. Spontaneous *communitas* has something “magical” about it. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power. But this power untransformed cannot readily be applied to the organizational details of social existence. It is no substitute for lucid thought and sustained will. On the other hand, structural action swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of *communitas*. Wisdom is always to find the appropriate relationship between structure and *communitas* under the *given* circumstances of time and place, to accept each modality when it is paramount without rejecting the other, and not to cling to one when its present impetus is spent.⁵

³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995), 131-2.

⁴ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 132.

⁵ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 139.

This tension or dialectic between structure and *communitas* is complex and complicated. But, as I will show with examples from the sporting world, it is even more complex and complicated than Turner indicates.

Turner's work on pilgrimages provides a good example of *communitas*. He tells the story of the Dark Virgin of Guadalupe—an image of the Virgin Mary mysteriously imprinted on a rough cloak. According to Turner, thousands of people come each day to see the image.⁶ While the individuals who make the pilgrimage to Guadalupe come from a vast variety of occupations and social strata, on the pilgrimage they simply are pilgrims. The structure of daily life is set aside and *communitas* among the pilgrims is achieved. Joined in pilgrimage together, the participants are affirmed in their beliefs and are nourished by the support of one another.⁷ Such is also the case with the Islamic *hajj*. In this regard I am reminded of Malcolm X's account of participating in that pilgrimage and how encountering pilgrims of all races and nationalities opened his eyes to the racism of the Nation of Islam. What he experienced on his *hajj* was *communitas* as well.

Because pilgrimages are to specific geographical locations, Turner notes that they also “are, in a way, both instruments and indicators of a sort of mystical regionalism as well as of a mystical nationalism.”⁸ In other words, pilgrimages affirm the sacrality of the places to which the pilgrims go—be that a city, state, region, or nation. Thus, Guadalupe is sacred, as is (of course) Mecca.

While religious rituals are stereotypical examples of *communitas*-creating behavior, what about non-religious rituals? What about sports? What about college football in the South—that most tradition-rich and ritualized of American sports?

⁶ Turner, *Dramas*, 189.

⁷ Turner, *Dramas*, 198.

⁸ Turner, *Dramas*, 212.

Anyone who has made their way to a major college football game in the South understands the connection between Turner's account of pilgrimages and what fans do on the way to the game. Going down the road the pilgrims to the game encounter one another, their cars decorated with the symbols or totems of their team. They are not doctors or lawyers or teachers or plumbers. They are fans, and they experience *communitas* as such. Their devotion and loyalty to the team is bound with their pride in their state or region. As they join together in their pilgrimage to the sacred sites (such as the stadium where the heroes take the field and the halls of fame or museums where pilgrims look at famous "cloaks" worn by their heroes), they affirm one another in their beliefs. In particular, they affirm their beliefs that their team will win or at least that their team is the one that should win, that their alma mater is special, its grounds sacred, etc.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Inside the stadium, fans encounter one another not according to their roles in the social structure outside the stadium, but as concrete, immediate others. It is an egalitarian encounter. One Tennessee fan writes:

On any given Saturday afternoon at a Big Orange football game, you can see a small part of mankind, through God's eyes, as nothing more or less than human beings. It is the only place I have ever seen four generations of people, rich and poor, black and white, and all religions, sing, dance and celebrate together. Even if only for one autumn afternoon, a young, black, female student and a retired, redneck deer hunter can embrace and dance to 'Rocky Top' without worrying about what others might think. A blue-collar carpenter and a CEO of a large corporation can share a favorite memory or game and shake hands as equals.⁹ (Ricky Jones, fan, in *A Vol's Walk*, 16).

This is a description of *communitas*.

⁹ Ricky Jones in *A Vol's Walk: A Book By Tennessee Fans . . . For Tennessee Fans* (Birmingham, Alabama: FANTastic Memories, 2005), 16.

The holding of a common meal is another way in which community (the tangible product of *communitas*) is formed. On game day, this happens through tailgating. Food and the sharing of meals (especially in the context of picnics or other outdoor activities) is a large part of Southern culture and a central part of the game day experience. Meals often are started early in the morning, with smoked meats being prepared all day. People at a tailgating site spend the day in communion, and often join with others at adjacent sites.

TAILGATING VIDEO CLIPS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Through their participation in pilgrimages, tailgating, and all the other rituals of the college football game day, fans create a distinctive community. They generate *communitas*. In the survey data that I collected in a variety of locales, Southern college football fans ranked highly the college football game day as a time where they experience what I would call *communitas*. Of those I surveyed, college football ranked behind only family and friends in regard to where fans experienced the “greatest sense of community”—ranking just ahead of church.

As Turner notes, when *communitas* occurs it is not far from structure. He describes the relationship as dialectical, implying a back-and-forth between structure and *communitas*. I think this often is the case. But we also find in ritual the concurrence of structure and *communitas*—not a back-and-forth, but a simultaneity. Think about college football. The typical stadium at a major university in the Southeastern Conference is the site of many rituals and the experience of *communitas*. At the same time, it is very much structured along the lines of economic class and social status. While fans may chat about the game and “high-five” one another as they enter the stadium (an example of

communitas), they inevitably will head to separate seating sections. Some of these will be in the “nose bleed” sections in the upper deck, while others may be lower level on the 50-yard line. Clearly there is an economic and social structure within the stadium. Those lower level seats will be much more expensive than those in the upper deck, sometimes by thousands of dollars.

Another example of the simultaneity of structure and communitas can be seen in the ever-popular team walks before the game.

VIDEO CLIPS OF TEAM WALKS

In these video clips we see communitas, fan with fan and fans with players. At the same time, we see the structure of race permeate the ritual. The fans are overwhelmingly white, while the players often are black. In the state of Alabama, 26 percent of the population is African American. At the University of Alabama, the student body is only 11 percent black—less than half the state percentage.¹⁰ The football team, however, is 53 percent black. In the state of Mississippi, 37 percent of the population is African American. At the University of Mississippi, the student body is only about 15 percent black—again, less than half the state percentage.¹¹ The football team, however, is 64 percent black. What does this tell us about race relations at these flagship state institutions? What does this tell us about the issue of race in these states? Why are there not more black fans and alumni at these institutions? In short, while communitas is occurring, the structure of race persists. Again, this is not so much a dialectic as a simultaneity.

¹⁰ The student body is 86 percent white.

¹¹ The student body is 82 percent white.

Conclusion

The ritual of college football in the South allows people of different races, economic classes, and social status to achieve *communitas*. At the same time, embedded in these rituals are the very structures (race, economic class, and social status) that the rituals are meant to overcome. In other words, the dialectical tension between structure and *communitas* is not avoided via ritual, but is experienced *and* transcended within the ritual itself. While *communitas* may temporarily overcome the divisions of structure or at least allow us to ignore them, it is not sufficient apparently to prompt economic or political change in order to address the inequities of those divisions.

The results of this research are applicable to sport more generally, and raise several important questions: To what extent is sport entangled with fundamentally political issues? Does sport conceal political or social problems behind a façade of *communitas*? If religion is typically a place where rituals that achieve *communitas* occur, do we see here one of the ways that sport functions religiously? And is sport increasingly becoming an alternative for Americans to experience *communitas* as attendance at stereotypical “houses of worship” decline? If so, is sport our new (as Marx would say) “opiate of the masses”? These are all questions, of course, for further research and reflection.