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HABERMAS ON RITUALS AND THE ROLE OF ART

Extra-ordinary communication, Habermas analyzes in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*,¹ is represented by religious rituals that reveal the human fundamental relationship with the divine. The anthropological research of Ernesto De Martino showed that the experience of precariousness of human life has a cognitive value as a source of reassuring models constituted in the tradition. The sociologist Emile Durkheim and the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed on the function of rituals for the cohesion of communities. The antropologists Arnold van Gennep and Meyer Fortes considered the social and cultural role of the myth that extends to the religious sphere. The ongoing philosophical discussion on the nature and function of rituals presents several fundamental perspectives.² Art is a fundamental dimension that seems to belong to the very nature of rituals.

According to Habermas, we can intend the rite as the expression of that phylogenetic passage from the biological behavior of human species to symbolic mediated rituals. First, we must consider what Habermas calls “sacred complex,” namely that bound between myth and rite that evolved through the process of social rationalization. We have anthropological studies at our disposal that

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¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II. Aufsätze und Repliken* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).

² Kevin Schilbrack, *Thinking through Rituals* (London: Routledge, 2004); Raffaella Giovagnoli, “Lifeworld, Language and Religion. Habermas’ Perspective”, *Aquinas* 58, 1-2 (2015): 253–260; Raffaella Giovagnoli, “Lifeworld, We-intentionality and Rituals”, in *Mind, Collective Agency, Norms. Essays on Social Ontology*, ed. Pietro Salis and Guido Seddone (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2017), 22–32; Raffaella Giovagnoli, “From Habits to We-intentionality. Rituals as Social Habits”, in *The Logic of Social Practices*, ed. Raffaella Giovagnoli and Robert Lowe (Cham: Springer, Sapere, 2020), 185–199; Raffaella Giovagnoli, “Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives and Normative Aspects”, *Roczniki Kulturoznawcze* 12, no. 1 (2021): 93–107. <http://doi.org/10.18290/rkult21121-7>.

provide hypothesis on the Neolithic lifeforms and even back to the XI millennium A.C. We recall that cave paintings have been discovered 50,000 years ago in Australia, in probable cult places and the first testimony of a grave of *homo sapiens* goes back to not less than 100,000 years ago, a time in which also more ancient necklaces and jewels have been discovered. We can observe the role of art in very form of material and non-material media of testimony; myths and rites could be transmitted by non-material media such as invocations, dance and singing and go back to a period that runs from 300,000 to 100,000 years ago, in which the *homo heidelbergensis* existed.

The sacred complex is made of mythical histories and ritualistic practices, that show themselves in different places, times and forms. Mythical stories can help to clarify the meaning of ritual practices, because they transfer the semantic contents of an ancient gestural communication into a more evolved grammatical language. Habermas talks about an overlapping of more evolved communicative forms on archaic ones. But every form of ritualistic expression always presents an artistic aspect involved in the use of objects and performances to relay to extra-ordinary dimensions. So, if we imagine the funeral rite that tries to elaborate the experience of human precariousness and the suffering for the lost of our loved, we observe the growing of narrations and rites that call on otherworldly powers. The syndrome of myth and rite provides stability and certainty to collective identity that must be protected against what is extraneous and unknown.³ The performative aspect of the myth does not only explain the existence of things in the world, but reflects the psychic dynamic provoked by threats and dangers, by constituting a bridge between myth and rite.

The rite is a dimension of human behavior that is not necessarily bound to the myth and reveals the original sense of the sacred complex.⁴ According to Habermas, the social function of rituals is plausibly clarified by Durkheim, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss who investigated the rites of gift and exchange. Moving from the studies of Durkheim, Arnold van Gennep analyzed the initiation rites that regulate the passage from a status to another across birth, puberty, marriage and funeral that entail dimensions of the self-thematization of society and the creation of normative obligations.⁵ For example, when a teenager is allowed to join the adult males community, he learns the social roles that belong to the new status. By absolving certain ritualistic prescriptions, he enters,

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).

⁴ Massimo Rosati, *Ritual and the Sacred* (London: Ashgate, 2009); Matteo Bortolini, "Found in Translation. J. Habermas Anthropotechnics and Postsecularism", forthcoming in *European Legacy*.

⁵ Habermas, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II*, 67–68.

so to say, in a new segment of the society by acquiring the capacities to obey to the corresponding expectancies. The initiation has the scope to anticipate the risk that, in the passages from a status to another, the continuity of social integration breaks and the forces of normative bonds are paralyzed. The initiation implies a profound change in individual identity; it is like a staging of death and rebirth.⁶

Following Wilhem Duprè, Habermas intends the rite as an original form of self-reflection in primitive communities, because the sacred dimension ought to represent the existential bases of the new forms of life, socialized through symbols and every form of representation shows the role of art in different forms.⁷ Rituals reflect events and situations like birth and death, uncertain communitarian life, depletion of material and organic resources, vulnerability of body and soul. The sacral complex derives from the way in which primates solved the problem to pass a fundamental evolutionary threshold represented by symbolic communication. We can observe two forms of communication at a primitive stage: the ordinary language of gestures and the extra-ordinary language of rites aiming at invoking otherworldly powers.

A very important observation suggests that there is a division of labor between so different forms of communication: ordinary language rises from relationships of cooperation, while ritual behavior falls out of ordinary functions. Exactly those anthropological studies help Habermas to formulate the hypothesis according to which the rite would be a response to the precariousness of the *new* form of communicative socialization going through linguistic symbols. Art plays a fundamental role to make rites incredible devices to secure communitarian identity and to give sense to human life.

Rites reveal the difficult cooperation between individuals and society, where the collective must succeed to establish social order, but the individual consciousness cannot lose her autonomy that develops through interaction. Rituals possess a stronger normative dimension than normativity of linguistic conventions, as they have to do with the regeneration of social solidarity and with the self-thematization of collective identity. The ritual represents the functional response to the crisis of knowledge expressed by the myth; a crisis that rises from the confrontation with reality as source of dissonant experiences. Rituals with their powerful artistic aspect continue to secure identity for the collective against the pressures of new explanations of the world.

⁶ Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Editions A. Et J. Picard, 1909).

⁷ Wilhelm Duprè, *Religion in Primitive Cultures* (Den Haag: Mouton, 1975).

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