

ADAM B. SELIGMAN
ROBERT P. WELLER

RETHINKING
PLURALISM

Ritual, Experience,
and Ambiguity



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Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.

“But which is the stone that supports the bridge?” Kublai Khan asks.

“The bridge is not supported by one stone or another,” Marco answers, “but by the line of the arch that they form.”

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: “Why do you speak of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.”

Polo answers: ‘Without stones there is no arch.’

Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities (London: Picador, 1979), 66.

This ‘middle’ means near the middle, for with respect to the exact middle, they have already said that no one knows the true central point except God alone.

Nachmanides, Commentary on Genesis, ed. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Judaica Press, 2005), 71

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Introduction

ONE OF US had a friend in graduate school, Cathy, who was a very fine cook, but her grandmother was even better. Cathy would rave about her grandmother's wonderful cakes, with their perfect taste and texture every time—the best cakes in the world. Like a good modern cook, she asked her grandmother for the recipe. This turned out to be in vain, because her grandmother cooked in a different way. There had never been a recipe; the grandmother simply combined the ingredients by look, touch, sight, and smell. Thinking like the psychology graduate student she was, Cathy constructed a recipe by carefully observing her grandmother in the kitchen, measuring each ingredient before it went into the batter and writing down every action: this many cups of flour, that many tablespoons of butter. Armed with her newly notated knowledge, she returned to her own kitchen and baked the cake, only to be sadly disappointed. The cake was fine, but nothing like the original.

Thinking she had made an error, Cathy went back to her grandmother, carefully measuring, observing, and noting things once more. She did not find the simple notational error that she was looking for, however. Instead, every single ingredient measured out differently. She tried again with a third cake: different again, even though the result was as delicious as ever. The lesson she finally learned is that the perfect cake cannot be notated, but appears only in context. It is not the product of a recipe, but of unique interactions involving the cook's senses (how she packs her cup measure, how she stirs her batter), the temperature and humidity at the moment, the specific cooking utensils, and the particular histories of the ingredients (the fat content of the butter, how long the flour had been sitting on the shelf, and so on).

Cathy gave up on the recipe. Recipes let anyone bake a cake, but they let no one bake a perfect cake.

This is not a book about cooking, but it is about how we can deal with the intractable and untidy realities that make recipes and other instructive

lists simultaneously so central to our lives and so inadequate to our needs. Much of human experience resembles those cake ingredients. It changes so constantly that even our bag of flour has different properties today from those it had yesterday. This is true of our understandings of ourselves, of the natural world, and of the social relations that surround us. All of these things are so complex and so variable that they force us to simplify, even just to see or think. Imagine, for example, those extreme close-up images of an unrecognizable terrain that we suddenly recognize as a human palm as the camera moves away. Only the simplification of distance and the loss of detail allow us to make sense out of the underlying complexity. Or recall the enormous burden of memory that Proust tastes in a cookie. Or think of the diplomatic impossibilities of dealing with a student who is also your waiter, your better in karate class, and the lover of a colleague. Out of all the infinite possible detail, which itself changes from moment to moment, what can we grasp on to? We must categorize, but every category pulls us away from the shifting and complex experience of reality. Every category thus leaves an ambiguous zone at its edges.

Ambiguity is built into our experiences and relationships, but we have to impose an order of some sort in order to live: this is the fundamental problem that we try to think through in this book. How can we create boundaries and transcend them at the same time? What grounds can we find to cross the lines that we must draw between categories of ideas, objects, and persons? How, to reduce this to a pressing social problem, can a genuine pluralism be possible, the ability both to accept and cross the boundary between “us” and “them”? Our first chapter is devoted to this problem of ambiguity, arguing that human existence and our need to interact with each other and the natural world force ambiguity upon us. The very production of categories to deal with those interactions, we argue, inevitably generates ambiguities and forces us to face the problem of how to deal with them.

Cake recipes are a subclass of one kind of solution to this problem. They reduce and simplify a shifting reality by giving us a checklist of rules to follow. We call this broad category “notation.” It includes far more than cooking, of course. Any bookstore offers shelf after shelf of books with sets of rules for anything we want to do. There are all of the do-it-yourself manuals—the home shop equivalents of cookbooks. And just as Cathy found with her grandmother, those of us who try to learn plumbing or roof repair from a book quickly realize that it will never give us the skills of a veteran plumber or roofer whose extensive experience in many different contexts creates a kind of knowledge not captured in any list of

instructions. There are also all the self-improvement books that offer us formulas to lose weight, cure addictions, get rich, appreciate fine wines, or win friends and influence people.

Then there are the social scientific attempts to distill ambiguities and complexities by elaborating new categories to name and simplify them. This book is no exception—all books are notations, and we have begun already by starting to limn the boundaries of terms like “ambiguity” and “notation.” Classification remains a core piece of the scientific enterprise, as we try push further against the inadequacies of current categories to explain our data, and to develop new categories.

In contemporary societies, one of the most important forms of notation is the legal system. Sets of laws give us the rules that create one important basis for modern social life. They allow us, for example, to undertake a financial transaction with an utter stranger, or perhaps make a purchase over the Internet, and still feel confident that goods will be delivered. Laws are the way in which states notate social life. Lawyers are the people who best understand how to apply those rules as we draw up mortgages, wills, and deeds. But they are also the people who specialize in exploring the ambiguities at the edges of the law. Much of what happens in a courtroom, for instance, is not just the unearthing of facts in the style of Perry Mason. Usually all the facts are known to both sides before the trial starts. Instead, the lawyers work to clarify the ambiguities that always result when sets of rules run up against the complexities of real contexts. Arguments between prosecution and defense often center on exactly how the law applies in a given context. Every time a precedent is set through this process of interpretation, the legal system has attempted to reduce ambiguity a little bit more.

Chapter 2 carries this discussion much further, and it also makes the crucial point that notation can never fully resolve ambiguity. We cannot live without notation, but notation can never be complete. Just ask anyone who has never used a saw or a wrench before, but has tried to follow a home repair manual; or anyone who has never sewn to follow a dress pattern. We can return to cookbooks for an easy example. One of the most important cookbooks in the history of French cuisine is Auguste Escoffier’s *Le guide culinaire*, first published in 1903. All of his recipes are short and direct, and quite impossible to follow without training. His recipe for a chicken fricassee with onions and mushrooms in a wine-cream sauce (*à l’Ancienne*), for example, is just 76 words long in the English edition. It begins: “Prepare the Fricassee in the usual manner as for veal” and says

no more about cooking the chicken itself.¹ It gets no easier after that. These are sets of rules for someone who already knows a great deal.

The natural solution that most home cooks want is not, of course, the years of apprenticeship and bodily experience that Escoffier assumed. It is ever more detailed rules: rules that explain how to interpret the first set of rules. Supplying this was the genius of Julia Child and her co-authors in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Their recipe for the exact same dish begins on page 258 of the first volume, and continues on through page 261.² This is not counting the two other recipes in the book (for the onions and the mushrooms) that this one requires. It is roughly ten times the length of Escoffier's version, even though it omits the "pale baked crescents of puff pastry" with which he decorates the plate, and which occupy about 20 percent of his recipe (just 15 words). The success of the book certainly indicates that more rules can help make things accessible. Nevertheless, instructions that tell us to cook the vegetables until they are "almost tender" are not very helpful to an inexperienced cook. A truly complete set of rules would be unreadably long if it were possible at all. And even then, the best we could hope for would be Cathy's perfectly adequate but far from perfect cake.

Endless notation, the attempt to conquer ambiguity by creating ever more categories and rules, is ultimately futile. It simply produces new ambiguities, as in the evolutionary biologists' joke that every time they discover a missing link it produces two new missing links. By saying this, we do not mean to argue that notation is unnecessary or undesirable. On the contrary, we do not see how human social life would be possible without it. Our claim is simply that notation cannot solve the problem of ambiguity, and that its primary mechanism of establishing new boundaries therefore causes as many problems as it solves. Pluralism and related problems will not be solved so much by notating new boundaries—new rules and categories—as by finding ways of working across them.

The remainder of this book is dedicated to two other general ways of dealing with ambiguity, not by trying to remove it through the creation of new boundaries but by learning to live with it in different ways. The first of these is ritual and the second is shared experience. There may well be other important mechanisms, but we have chosen to concentrate on these two because we think that they have important potentials as we struggle to live with ambiguity and difference. There has been a long tendency to look toward notation as the preeminent solution to problems like pluralism, measuring its objects in census categories, and legislating its problems

away through constitutions and legal codes. This can take forms that vary—from the denial that there can be any significant public boundaries separating citizens or, at the other extreme, the ethnic cleansings that have haunted Europe’s past. Ritual and shared experience offer alternatives to these notational strategies, and so deserve greater attention than they usually receive.

By “ritual,” we mean primarily those acts that are formalized through social convention and are repeated over and over in ways that people recognize as somehow the same as before. We are less interested in phenomena like the personal rituals that psychiatrists sometimes discuss (which are repeated but not social), but we do mean to include a wide range of phenomena that are not limited to religion alone. As we will discuss in chapter 3, much of the anthropological literature on ritual has emphasized its notational capacities, its ability to define and create boundaries. This is certainly correct, but we emphasize that crossing boundaries is just as inherent to the ritual process.

Ritual crosses borders of all kinds: between humans and spirits, men and women, food and people. Like the potlatch, the Olympics, or Trobriand cricket, it can unite diverse peoples. As in purifications, initiations, or sacrifices, it can transform objects or people from one category to another. At the most fundamental level, it carries us across the very boundaries that it most clearly creates, the boundaries between everyday life and those moments of ritual life. This happens when people cross themselves when entering or leaving a Catholic church, when a judge bangs a gavel in a courtroom, or when professors march into or out of a room wearing mortarboard and gown for a graduation.

Émile Durkheim understood the sacred as the world that is “set apart” from the ordinary and profane. For him, the distinction between sacred and profane was the most fundamental category boundary of all, the beginning of all setting apart, and thus fundamental to society. In his sense, we usually think of ritual as dealing with the sacred world alone, but in fact the basic structure of every single ritual is to cross the boundary between sacred and profane, not simply to play in the world of the sacred. Unlike notation, which creates categories, ritual crosses over them, and it does this repeatedly. The repetitions themselves will form a crucial part of our argument on ritual, because they create a flow of time and thus the grounds for imagining a shared past and future. That is, the rhythms of ritual are one key to what may allow us to live together socially, even as we accept the differences that separate us.

A repeated crossing between sacred and profane has profoundly different social implications from a view that would leave us on just one side or the other of that boundary. We could think of secularism as the reduction of all categories to the profane. At the other extreme, the modern religious fundamentalisms attempt to reduce all categories to the sacred. Either alternative leaves no space for pluralism; boundaries are not crossed. It should probably not surprise us that both secularism and religious fundamentalism grew out of the Reformation, which itself was the beginning of a powerful attack on ritual that has in many ways continued to characterize attitudes in Europe and America and has had a strong influence around the world. Ritual, we hope to suggest, still has an important role to play in teaching us to live with differences and all their associated ambiguities.

The final response to ambiguity that we will discuss here (primarily in chapter 4) deals with boundaries and categories in a different way—it brackets those differences away for a period of time to allow us to work in the full complexity and idiosyncrasy of a particular context. On a temporary and ad hoc basis, this strategy lets us take practical action by eliding the problems of categories and the ambiguities they produce. Time flows here, too, but no longer in the predictable rhythms of ritual that allow us to imagine ourselves as a society. Instead, it is truly historical time that never repeats but instead constantly forces us into new configurations—configurations that can potentially challenge and remake our most fundamental understandings.

Let us indulge in one last food example. This is a story that one of us heard at a summer camp reunion, told by a camper recalling an event of the 1980s. This camp had a very strict rule that children could not eat sweets or junk food of any kind. Parents could send packages of food, but these were always opened in the office so that counselors could confiscate any contraband food. The office was tiny, though, and one day an enormous box arrived for one of the campers. There was no way to open it and pull out the contents in the office, so they agreed to open it in the child's cabin, closely supervised by counselors on guard against any possible junk food.

And indeed, mixed in among many other things, the box contained three packages of a greatly desired and utterly forbidden treat—Pringles. All the cabin's campers were standing right there, though, and a din of wheedling, pleading voices ensued. The counselors conferred for a minute and agreed to a compromise. The children could have all the Pringles they could grab in 30 seconds. Further negotiations ensued, for instance about

whether opening the package counted (it did not). With the packages open and the Pringles in neat piles and rows, a counselor counted down: ready, set, GO!

Bedlam quickly followed as all the children grabbed the chips one at a time. One boy said to do it his way, and shoved as many as he could hold straight into his mouth. Soon everyone was doing the same. In 30 seconds, it was all over, except for the cleaning. There were Pringle shards everywhere—children had to be washed, bedding shaken out, floors swept, and so on. In the end, each child probably got little more than a mouthful of the forbidden food.

Rules must exist in order for us to share lives together. But we also have to understand when it is better to break them, when the social order is sturdy enough to allow a little shaking in exchange for some appropriate rewards. The counselors here did not follow the letter of the camp rules, but they were helping to strengthen the spirit of those rules, and many others besides: goods are collective and not individual, sharing is a key value, good fun is why everyone is at camp, and perhaps most importantly, decision making is a shared responsibility that includes campers as well as counselors.

The example is trivial, of course. We bring it up, however, because it illustrates the importance of the context, of the historical moment, and the way that it can work positively by bracketing away some of the usual rules, restrictions, and categories of life. The usual default in such a situation would be to enforce the letter of the law by confiscating the food, or perhaps a sort of passive rebellion in which campers manage to sneak some of the food away and eat it on the sly. Instead of either enforcing the law or actively rejecting it, the situation became an opportunity to work together, to reach a compromise that offered everyone more than just obedience or resistance would have.

These three modes for handling boundaries—notation, ritual, and shared experience—are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, we argue that all three are necessary and important in all societies. They intermix in different ways, however, and the nature of that mix helps to construct alternative historicities and socialities. As we will discuss, each implies a very different notion of time and a very different conception of self and other. We devote one chapter to each mode, but also interweave a set of interludes to work through some examples—textual, historical, and ethnographic—with more sensitivity to their own contexts. In writing these interludes, we have allowed ourselves some room to wander, but

most of our examples come from the Jewish and Chinese cases that we know best. These two long traditions lend themselves easily to our purposes because they provide many examples of the complex interactions among notation, ritual, and shared experience. Each has a long notational tradition, but each has also particularly emphasized ritualized ways of dealing with ambiguity and each has made room as well for the more contextualized uses of shared experience. We have thus chosen them not so much because they are representative but because they are illustrative of the full range of human possibilities that we want to explore.

From within the almost infinite possible range of human interactions, we are most concerned in this book with exploring the possibilities of empathy and living with difference that both ritual and shared experience evoke. Our contemporary world seems trapped in notational devices that absolutize our boundaries into binary divisions—increasingly impassable walls that separate without bridging, divide without uniting. Such powerful boundaries discourage us from exploring the unknown, from hosting strangers, from finding familiarity in the unfamiliar. We use our notational systems—our categories of knowledge—to isolate the worlds of security and danger, closely homologous to the known and the unknown. The grey shades of ambiguity get lost all too often, and with them the ability to widen the boundaries of ourselves through the creative illusions that the ambiguous space provides.

The increasing interconnections of our global world make the imperative of living together differently a central concern for everyone. This book suggests that such a genuine pluralism involves an approach to boundaries and their navigation that must make room for the ambiguous and poorly delineated just as much as for the clear conceptual distinctions on which our notational systems are based. Crossing boundaries without dissolving them, we will claim, forms the very heart of empathy and so of life with the other. Empathy grows out of hard, focused boundary work, which both ritual and shared experience demand.

While the chapters of this book work out the analytic armature of this argument, it is in the interludes that we contextualize concrete cases dealing with different ritual orders and frames of experience. For us, and we hope for our readers, these cases—from Greek myth, Jewish exegesis and law, Chinese politics, and Confucian thought—are first and foremost lessons in humility. They offer examples from former times and very different civilizational endeavors of the multiple ways in which ambiguity can be approached: valued, précised, and played with, without succumbing

to the very present drive to disambiguate and so reduce experience to binary categories. It seems to us that there is much here to learn from.

Looked at from a different angle, we may well ask how we can order the world and still find a way to live with the problems that the resulting categories create. How can we deal with otherness in all its forms—the inevitable result of ordering—and still recognize how much we have in common with the other? In our contemporary world, notation and more notation seem to provide the default response to these issues. It is our hope here to enrich the possibilities by putting ritual and shared experience back on the table as equal partners as we all continue to search for solutions to the deep problems of a genuine pluralism.

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The Importance of Being Ambiguous

AN EARLY DEATH knell for tonal music sounded in June 1865, with the opening notes at the first public performance of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. The initial chord—famous among musicologists as the Tristan chord—is dissonant, leading a listener with an ear accustomed to European music traditions to wait endlessly for a resolution into some more consonant chord. Consonance involves a perceived aural stability, a comfortable placement into one of the set of 24 basic harmonic patterns accepted in the tradition (such as A minor or B major). What we hear as dissonance are the notes that do not fit the pattern, the ones that have been borrowed from some other pattern. That is, dissonance presents itself to the ear as a tension that makes us yearn for a resolution. The ambiguity in the Tristan chord lies in the possibility of resolving it in several different ways. It seems to be in too many keys at once.

Wagner was, of course, hardly the first to use dissonance to add tension to his music. While exactly what people hear as dissonant has changed over time and varies culturally, the basic musical movement of dissonance to consonance, tension to balance, ambiguity to clarity, is both ancient and widespread. Even the particular notes of the Tristan chord had been used by earlier composers, who also played with its radical ambiguity.¹ Wagner's innovation was that he never let go of the chord. Every time it sounds as if it is about to resolve, he moves it into some new realm of ambiguity, androgynous and irresolvable. The result is a constant disquiet, a churning yearning that fits perfectly with the intertwined love/death at the heart of the story. Instead of relieving us of the ambiguity, Wagner makes us swim in it. The idea recurs several times throughout the opera, and he only allows a resolution at the end of the final act. The harmonic ambiguity of a chord whose tonal base was unclear meant that, at least for these long

passages, the opera did not establish a key. It was the beginning of the end for the tonal system.

Except, of course, that reports of the death of tonality—common by the early twentieth century—turned out to be greatly premature. Tonality continues to predominate in all forms of popular music, and remains strong even within contemporary “classical” music. Listeners are now far more comfortable with atonality than during Wagner’s day. Nevertheless, most music today continues the long tradition of using harmonic ambiguity as a device to produce tension, to toy with the boundaries of a stable tonal center, but then to return to a harmonic home. It is this productive tension between ambiguity and order that we hope to explore here.

A World of Categories

We bring up this musical experiment because it seems to predate some similar developments in social scientific thinking about ambiguity in a world of categories. Among the founding thinkers of modern social science, it was especially Durkheim who placed the problem of classification at the very center of our undertaking. Philosophically, Durkheim was very much a “constructivist” *avant la lettre*. That is to say, he refused to privilege any particular understanding or construction of the world as ontologically more “real” than any other. Instead, he understood the worlds we inhabit as constructed socially, together—a work of many minds, working with the tools of language and other symbol systems.² In *Primitive Classification*, he and his co-author Marcel Mauss argued that there is nothing natural about classification systems, but that they are a necessary and learned feature of human groups. While much that we experience is a fuzzy continuum, we need to classify things and concepts to survive, “to arrange them in groups which are distinct from each other, and are separated by clearly determined lines of demarcation.”³ In his later work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim makes a case for the division between sacred and profane being the most fundamental classification of all, with the sacred’s most important feature being its categorical clarity. Sacred things are utterly set apart and forbidden to the profane—the distinction is absolute in Durkheim, and there is no room for ambiguity.⁴ At roughly the same time, Ferdinand de Saussure was also clarifying the notion of category in language, making the unambiguous contrast between categories into the fundamental building block of his analysis of language.

These insights shaped much of what came later, especially in anthropology, as it turned to fundamental classifications of things like space, time, and person. One of the important breakthroughs came with the structuralists, who drew heavily on both Durkheim and Saussure. A key insight grew out of the realization that if much of the world were really a continuum, then our arbitrary (i.e., culturally determined) imposition of categories would necessarily omit objects or experiences that did not fit neatly into any category. That is, while we cannot live without distinctions, we also never quite make our peace with them at either individual or social levels.

Claude Lévi-Strauss developed this, for instance, in his discussion of “mediators” in myths. While most of myth, for Lévi-Strauss, has a structure of underlying categories quite parallel to what Saussure saw for the grammar or phonology of a language, he also recognized certain features that stood between categories and could never be resolved. In *The Raw and the Cooked*, he discussed fish poison (an inedible food) and the opossum (combining life/motherhood and death/stench) as such permanent ambiguities. Both represent “a union of nature and culture which brings about their disjunction.”⁵ In a veiled reference back to the Tristan chord, he even wonders whether Isolde can be reduced to an “opossum function,” and whether the mediation of the love philter/death philter in the opera relates to the essential ambiguity of its tonality.⁶

The British anthropologists Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach further developed the idea that the leftover bits that fall between are crucial to

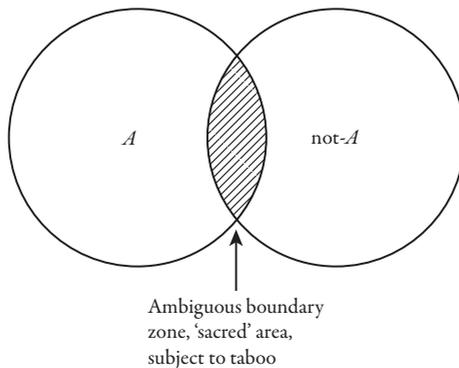


FIGURE 1.1 Ambiguity in Leach

After Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols Are Connected: An Introduction to the Use of Structuralist Analysis in Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 35.