

## **Dangerous Acquisitions? An Examination of History's Appropriation and Utilization of Ritual Theory**

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To examine the role of ritual within historical methodology is to examine the evolving relationship between two fields: the field that coined the term and developed its original methodology (anthropology), and the field that appropriated the term for its own purposes (history). This paper attempts to probe the academic development of ritual studies, particularly with reference to the explosion of its use within these two fields during the 1960s and 1970s and the subsequent questioning of its academic validity by scholars since the 1980s. The use of ritual by historians – particularly medievalists on whom I shall focus - as a means of gleaning new insight into the past serves as one of the primary examples of the attempted merging of the two disciplines. This topic addresses the ongoing search for the potential in uniting the two fields of anthropology and history in terms of methodology; in so doing, one must confront the inherent academic weaknesses of both disciplines, revealed to a certain extent by the attempted alliance via ritual.

The history of the academic approach to the concept of ritual is a topic that has been covered extensively by previous scholars, most noticeably by Philippe Buc.<sup>1</sup> Buc remains at the forefront of the debate on the utility of ritual and has significantly examined and attacked the utilization of the term by historians. Yet his frequent invectives represent only the latest in an extended investigation regarding how best to access and describe the past. The purpose of this paper is not to continue Buc's work in affirming or denying the validity of the study of ritual as applicable to historians, but such questions initiate an examination into ritual's meteoric rise and fall within the historical community. The investigation aims to probe the quagmire that is the background to the term ritual as a disputed means for historians to access information about past

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Buc, "Ritual and Interpretation: The Early Medieval Case," *Early Medieval Europe* 9, no. 2 (2000). Buc, "The Monster and the Critics: A Ritual Reply," *Early Medieval Europe* 15, no. 4 (2007).

cultures, to understand why the term remains a panacea for some historians and the height of academic subjectivity to others.

To define “ritual” may seem an appropriate starting point; however, the attempt immediately draws the reader into the debate of the term’s utility as it has suffered from an inability in both disciplines to retain a specified meaning. One reads anthropologist Edmund Leach’s 1966 article “Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development” wherein he addresses this significant problem: “Unfortunately, although *ritual* is a concept very prominent in anthropological discourse, there is no consensus [sic] as to its precise meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed the term reflects more than a century of synthesis in interdisciplinary academic discourse, as Buc refers to it, “[carrying] the baggage of its early geological history.”<sup>3</sup> Buc’s approach to ritual is only the most recent layer of a deep and complex discursive evolution that affects the very core of historical inquiry. His discussion of the term’s lack of definition also bears relevance to this examination, as the malleability of this term has prolonged its academic life span and its use in historical analysis. We shall see how ritual’s ability to be shaped and reshaped by each successive generation of academics has enabled it to exist in a multi-disciplinary milieu.

The recognition of the potential subjectivity of the historical record during the 1960s and 1970s marks an academic watershed, one of the most important the discipline of history has undergone hitherto. Adherents to traditional methodologies of primary source analysis, advocated by the Rankean School<sup>4</sup> during the nineteenth century and upheld as a triumph of the long-attempted “objectivizing” of the historical field, underwent a massive methodological crisis of faith during this period, particularly in the wake of E.H. Carr’s polemic *What is History?* published in 1961.<sup>5</sup> Insisting on the utter subjectivity (and uselessness) of historical interpretation, Carr’s text reflected worries found within the field; however, Carr’s perspective also expressed an attitude towards history seen throughout the social sciences, particularly anthropology. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a pioneer in structural anthropology during the 1960s, attacked history on this point:

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Leach, “Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London Series B Biological Sciences* 251, no. 772 (1966). p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> This formulaic approach to history reflects the perspectives of the Rankean School of historical scholarship, based on the premise that through the use of primary sources, the historians could reveal a knowable objective diachronic reality. George C. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997). p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> E.H. Carr, *What Is History?*, 2001 ed. (London: Palgrave, 1961).

[H]istorical facts are no more *given* than any other...In so far as history aspires to meaning, it is doomed to select regions, periods, groups of men and individuals in these groups and to make them stand out...[History] is partial in the sense of being biased even when it claims not to be, for it inevitably remains partial –that is incomplete- and this is itself a form of partiality.<sup>6</sup>

The weakening adherence to the “objective” meta-narrative within historical scholarship witnessed its death knell in the 1960s and the concurrent rise in popularity of the methodologies of the *Annales* School among international historians.<sup>7</sup> Begun in the 1920s the founders, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, sought a “human-centred” approach to the field, a response to the “great man history” which had typified the field since the nineteenth century. The assertion underlying this new search for historical validity was a rejection that a diachronic recording of people and events brought historians closer to an objective truth, a meta-narrative that defined human experience. The chronological emphasis on human history seemed both a flawed endeavour and one that had neglected significant portions of the population. Instead historians now favoured a synchronic approach, the desire to explain each historical period in its own terms, the removal to a certain extent of “history” from the historical discipline.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, there arose the concern that traditional historical scholarship had been markedly myopic in its focus on the “great men” of history. Hitherto under-represented aspects of the historic population (i.e. the poor, women, etc.) became major elements of historical study and new investigations sought insight into themes and cultural elements beyond the names and dates emphasized by Rankean scholarship.<sup>9</sup>

The recognition of these two problematic areas of historical study arose simultaneously with the development, codification, and popularization of other social science’s methodologies, particularly anthropology.<sup>10</sup> In the downfall of the meta-narrative and the rise of synchronic history, new approaches to episodic history were necessary. New generations of historians during

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<sup>6</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage*, ed. Julian & Ernest Gellner Pitt-Rivers, trans. George Weidenfeld, English ed., *The Nature of Human Society* (London: Garden City Press, 1962). p. 257.

<sup>7</sup> Participants in the *Annales* movement resisted the appellation “school”. Despite this, I feel the term is appropriate when describing the codification of their multi-disciplinary approach and rejection of classical historicism.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1949). p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1957). Doris Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> For anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: 1922). In sociology for example, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin, 1930).

the 1940s and 1950s, eager to move beyond the limitations of Ranke, attempted to revalidate the field in utilizing the new approach to history as advocated by the *Annales* School. Part of this new multi-disciplinary approach to the study of history was the attempted appropriation of anthropological methodologies to historical sources. While some historians chose quantifiable data with which to interpret past events, seen in the rise of economic and geographical historians such as Fernand Braudel, others drew on the rising credibility of anthropological methods such as ritual theory in order to analyze historic elements of belief: myth, religion, superstition, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of studying ritual as a means of accessing cultural knowledge had seen multiple permutations since its original rise to academic prominence in the nineteenth century. Historians were by no means the first scholars to analyze ritual for its potential in demonstrating and conveying social values; instead linguists, folklorists, and anthropologists pioneered the first investigations into ritual elements of society both past and present.<sup>12</sup> These introductory introspections into ritualistic action focused on the perceived associations with cultural mythology, the origin of religion, and the sacrality/worship of an established social order. Numerous publications at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century debated the role of ritual as a fundamental element of human culture, notably Sir James Frazer's text *The Golden Bough* which emphasized ritual as the "original source of most of the expressive forms of cultural life."<sup>13</sup>

In terms of anthropological theory, two scholars had a demonstrable impact on the understanding of ritual as interpreted by anthropologists (and by proxy historians) working in the 1960s and 1970s: Emile Durkheim (*Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1912) and Arnold Van Gennep (*The Rites of Passage*, 1909). For these theorists ritual existed predominantly in the realm of the religious and/or sacred. Yet their systemization and dichotomizing of ritual activities (for Durkheim the distinction between sacred and profane, for Van Gennep the categorization of rites into separation, transition, and incorporation) yielded only marginal applicability to early

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<sup>11</sup> Please see Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, II vols. (London: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Including Friedrich Max Müller (*An Introduction to the Science of Religion*), Andrew Lang (*Myth, Ritual, and Religion*), and Edward B. Tylor (*Religion in Primitive Culture*). Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

twentieth century historians adhering to a diachronic framework of the past.<sup>14</sup> The corresponding development of ritual theory as well as the advent of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's method of participant observation as a means of acquiring ethnographic data aided anthropology's growth in prestige within academic communities at the same time as history's decline into subjectivism, as he states:

“[T]he anthropologist...has the unique advantage of being able to step back...The anthropologist is not bound to the scanty remnants of culture, broken tablets, tarnished texts, or fragmentary inscriptions. He need not fill out immense gaps with voluminous, but conjectural, comments.”<sup>15</sup>

Looking backward, it seems inevitable that history would find itself drawn into the ever-widening interdisciplinary study of ritual. Religious and folkloric studies had increasingly drawn on historical examples to justify their conclusions about the relationship between ritual and myth as well as the evolutionary stages of religion.<sup>16</sup> Flirtations with the merge of history and ritual theory were seen even in the pre-*Annales* years of Bloch's work with the publication of the foundational text *The Royal Touch* in 1924, an examination of the magical healing powers of medieval royalty.<sup>17</sup> Despite the utilization of ritual within his text, a sharp departure from the positivist history of his discipline's predecessors, Bloch's work was barely recognized within the field as to the value of historical ritual. Translated into English only in 1973, earlier colleagues treated this work as a manifestation of a quaint hobby rather than a text significant in its methodological approach.<sup>18</sup>

The 1950s witnessed a diversification of this theory within anthropology, perhaps most noticeably in the publications of Max Gluckman. His modification and adaptation of Durkheimian theory contributed significantly to both anthropology and history, seminal in its definitional shift of ritual from being exclusively a religious aspect of cultural phenomena to one

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<sup>14</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1912), Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

<sup>15</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," in *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 1948; reprint, 1982). p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> For example Jane Harrison's 1912 work *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J.E. Anderson, 1973 ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924; reprint, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Burke, "Preface," in *The Historian's Craft* (Glasgow: Manchester University Press, 1992; reprint, 2002). p. xi.

that could be applied as an element of social action.<sup>19</sup> This broadening of the field yielded rich fruits for the scavenging historian: able to utilize ritual as applicable to almost any historic event. Prior to this, ritual existed to some degree in the field, but limited to examinations of magic, esoteric religious practices, or ordination rites.<sup>20</sup> Once historians apprehended the latent universal applications of the term, ritual theory soon took on the appearance of a panacea for the field's difficulties in subjective cultural interpretation, as Sean Wilentz phrases it, "Anthropology, unlike *Annales* materialism, functionalist sociology, and orthodox Marxism, has given historians ways of seeing politics as a form of cultural interaction, a relationship (or a set of relationships) tied to broader moral and social systems."<sup>21</sup>

The publication of Clifford Geertz's influential text *The Interpretation of Cultures* in 1973 did even more to draw historians to the appealing flame of ritual studies. Geertz reimagined the purpose of ritual: rather than creating social solidarity (which Durkheim had emphasized as the underlying motive behind sacred action), ritual provided a means for people to interpret their own experiences. In the famous encapsulation of his theory: rituals produce a story people tell themselves about themselves.<sup>22</sup> Historians needed only to understand the story (via primary sources) in order to understand the culture. Rather than providing historians with universal truths (granting that coveted "objective" reality), through ritual one could analyze synchronic episodes in cultural history and extrapolate societal values that provided a comprehensive understanding of the past.<sup>23</sup> What could be more appealing to a post-*Annales* historian than a methodological ability to decipher the fundamental aspects of a past culture?

The impact of anthropological theorists is evident in historical scholarship from the 1970s. New approaches to religious and cultural aspects of history proliferated, particularly seen in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) by Keith Thomas.<sup>24</sup> Van Gennep's rites of passage comprise a fundamental aspect of Thomas' analysis of early modern religious rites; using the themes of separation, liminality, and re-integration as a means of analyzing how members of a

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<sup>19</sup> Max Gluckman, *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Such as E.M. Butler, *Ritual Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949).

<sup>21</sup> Sean Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics since the Middle Ages*, Paperback ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985; reprint, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Group, 1971), p. 40. For other examples of anthropology-based historical analysis, see Peter Brown, "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," *The English Historical Review* 88, no. 346 (Jan., 1973), Janet L. Nelson, "Ritual and Reality in the Early Medieval 'Ordines'," *Studies in Church History* 11 (1975).

community (linked through participation in the church) conceptualized the transition from one religiously-prescribed life stage to another.<sup>25</sup> Similar to other historians of his period, Thomas demonstrates little awareness of the complexity of anthropological theory beyond the ascription of certain events as rites or symbolic action or the problems inherent in treating historical texts as scientifically valid ethnographic material. Thomas' utilization of ritual demonstrates one of the fundamental critiques towards historians appropriating the methodologies of social sciences: the superficial application of theories as an attempt to bolster the "objectivity" of the historian and the field itself.

While the new anthropological focus in history was an important one, it exposed the field to potential vacillation between two cardinal sins of academic scholarship: utilizing historical sources without consideration of the aims and/or biases of the author as well as the historian's subjectivity in the interpretation of such texts. Historians now found themselves caught between removing all sentiment in historical action by limiting themselves to quantifiable data and interpreting texts of questionable historicity, opening themselves and their conclusions to criticisms concerning subjectivity. As Geertz phrased it in his 1964 article "Ideology as a Cultural System":

Lacking a developed analysis of motivation, [interest theory] has been constantly forced to oscillate between a narrow and superficial utilitarianism that sees men as impelled by rational calculation of their consciously recognized personal advantage and a broader, but no less superficial, historicism that speaks with a studied vagueness of men's ideas as somehow "reflecting," "expressing," "corresponding to," "emerging from," or "conditioned by," their social commitments.<sup>26</sup>

As historians were turning to this "new" approach in the hopes that it would enable them to "fuse our understanding of power, cultural expression, and political consciousness", anthropologists were having their own methodological crisis of faith about ritual studies' potential for valid analysis, particularly with the advent of semiotics as an area of anthropological inquiry in the work of Victor Turner.<sup>27</sup> In his influential work *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), Turner's definition of ritual harkened back to its early association with religion and magic;

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964). p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Wilentz, ed., *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual, and Politics since the Middle Ages*. p. 4.

however, it was his treatment of symbols within rituals that historians found most applicable: “The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context.”<sup>28</sup>

This recognition of the application of semiotics as a universal cultural element, not only in ritual but also in the construction of language provided the basis for the next generation of ritual theorists, both in anthropology and history. As language itself began to be viewed as a culturally-dependent and subjective system, the manner of describing ritual took on increasingly complex overtones.<sup>29</sup> This development in linguistics as a culturally based system had the potential for removing all ability to glean knowledge of the past from historical documents; as foreign symbolic elements, texts threatened a level of incomprehensibility to a certain extent, able to be understood only by members of the culture in which it was written. Symbols (as texts) now served as another preventative layer in analyzing historical texts, creating another methodological barrier between historians and the past. This tied into the ongoing subjectivity debate of historical scholarship, seen in particular in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, for example his 1972 text *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

Within his establishment of the nature of ritualistic action/sequences, Bourdieu was able to describe a method of analysis applicable for anthropologists and historians alike, “understanding ritual practice is not a question of decoding the internal logic of a symbolism but of restoring its practical necessity by relating it to the real condition of its genesis, that is, to the conditions in which its functions are defined.”<sup>30</sup> Yet in his critique of social theory, Bourdieu argued against the strive for “objectivism” within the social sciences, “the objectivist reduction which brings to light the so-called objective functions of myth and rites makes it impossible to understand how these functions are fulfilled because it brackets the agent’s own representation of the world and of their practice.”<sup>31</sup> The destruction of this long-attempted goal within both history and anthropology led to a serious re-examination of the worth of ritual studies (and eventually of history itself). Despite Bourdieu’s reinterpretation of how best to conceptualize the meaning of ritual action within a society, anthropologists were increasingly fearful that ritual examinations

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<sup>28</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967). p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Leach, "Ritualization in Man in Relation to Conceptual and Social Development." p. 404.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, English ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972; reprint, 1977). p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 115.

inevitably led to no “deeper” understanding of a culture, as Frits Staal states in 1979: “The only cultural values rituals transmit are rituals.”<sup>32</sup>

While the importance of semiotics and semantics rose to academic prominence during the 1970s, the impact of the potentiality for the invalidation of all primary sources within the historical field only arose during the 1980s. The debate in applying post-*Annales* historical interpretation alongside ritual theory is exemplified by the publication, attack, and rebuttal of Robert Darnton’s text *The Great Cat Massacre* in 1984.<sup>33</sup> The book focused on a rather unusual anecdote from mid-seventeenth century France featuring the ritualistic slaughter of cats by journeymen. Depicted by contemporary journalists as a humorous event, Darnton aimed to “get in on the joke” and acquire a new level of cultural understanding of the period by analyzing the event in the utilization of Geertzian representative models (the cat as a multi-layered cultural symbol for evil, the household, and female sexuality). Where his critic, Roger Chartier, drew issue with Darnton’s methodology was his reliance on a non-objective text; “the historian is dependent on a report that has already been made of it and a text that is already in existence, invested with its own specific ends. This text exhibits the event, but is also constitutes the event as the result of the act of writing”.<sup>34</sup> Even sixty years on, one still sees the effect of the *Annales* School. Gone is the attempt to wrangle an objective diachronic reality from these situations: the new focus is understanding the cultural milieu of the participants at a specific time. Yet such an attack also reflects the encroaching methodological problems seen in the anthropological field of the previous decade. The problem of the objectivity of the historical text as well as the culturally-dependent framework of the ritual are significant problems of analysis for Chartier.

We can utilize Darnton’s text as an example of the 1980s crisis within historical scholarship as semiotics, linguistics, and ritual theory came under introspection regarding the questionable ability to access the mental framework of a historical author as well as the inability to interact with a text from a different cultural perspective. If textual validity, interpretation of symbols, and the potential meaningless of ritual all invalidate primary sources, what is left for the historian? To render questions about the historicity or inextricable semiotics of a text irrelevant,

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<sup>32</sup> Frits Staal, “The Meaningless of Ritual,” *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1979). p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Roger Chartier, “Texts, Symbols, and Frenchness,” *The Journal of Modern History* 57, no. 4 (Dec., 1985), Robert Darnton, “The Symbolic Element in History,” *The Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 1 (Mar., 1986).

<sup>34</sup> Chartier, “Texts, Symbols, and Frenchness.” p. 685.

historians now found another discipline with which to assuage their worries of academic invalidity: literary theory. Historians were able to address these methodological questions by shifting the focus from emphasizing the validity of sources to the underscoring of the communicative ability of historical texts. As examinations of ritual and symbol became increasingly theorized as elements of language, literary theory seemed a natural avenue with which to pursue new methods of historical analysis and still utilize ritual theory as a valid historiographical tool. Instead of relying on the assumption that sources accurately conveyed verifiable data, whether as empirical events or symbolic representations of cultural values, historians kept the matter simple, as Paul Roth says,

The issue is their metaphysical status, whether or not we may presume some correspondence between our talk of events and events-in-themselves. To assume that logically adequate identity conditions for events is tantamount to proving that this is how things must be with the world is, of course, to beg the question at issue. Events *simpliciter* cannot be shown to exist; they are not known to be of nature's making rather than of ours. Events exist only by proxy...knowledge of events is restricted to happenings isolated under descriptions provided by interested parties.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of this approach's applicability to the continued analysis of historical ritual, scholars are divided. Some, namely Philippe Buc, argue that the layers separating the historian from a past ritual are too remote to allow for any insightful analysis.<sup>36</sup> The claim to study ritual is in actuality the study of a description of a ritual, one obfuscated by the historical writer's perceptions, biases, and intent. It is impossible, one could argue, to distil the "objective" ritual from the layers of textual meaning, rendering any attempt to utilize the term in a historical academic setting meaningless. Despite the weighty implications for history this accusation presents, literary theory has presented an answer acceptable to many historians. The evolving view of texts as representations of a cultural milieu, changeable and adaptable according to readership, rather than items viewed in isolation, allows a more open view of the construction of a past historical reality. As Bourdieu intimated, representations of a social world (in this case, historical sources) are in themselves constituents of social reality.<sup>37</sup> Historians can therefore

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<sup>35</sup>Paul A. Roth, "Narrative Explanations: The Case of History," *History and Theory* 27, no. 1 (Feb., 1988). p. 9.

<sup>36</sup>Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. p. 138.

<sup>37</sup>Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). p. 45.

approach descriptions of ritual not as ethnographic accounts of an event, but as a representation of how a writer was attempting to reflect a reality, both in the context of his/her historical milieu as well as the strategy or intent in writing itself.

The utilization of post-modern deconstruction as a vogue of academic theory (particularly the post-structuralist influence of Jacques Derrida) readdresses the lasting weakness of ritual in its lack of definition. During the late 1970s and 1980s scholars began debating the subjectivity and semantic difficulties of key academic terms in history, such as John Bossy's influential 1981 article "Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim" which re-examined the utilization of the word "religion" in its application to medieval culture.<sup>38</sup> The distinction between medieval and modern concepts of the word reflects the ongoing linguistic crisis of the 1980s. Similar and to a certain extent greater problems arose for ritual theory. As Buc has argued, the utilization of the term "ritual" suffers from a lack of definition not only in its application to the past but also in its methodological use within both fields of anthropology and history; thus any potential application is negated.<sup>39</sup> Similar to the manipulation of any culturally-loaded term (feudalism, culture, etc.), debate continues to rage on their usage in academics; however, at the risk of potentially dismissing every word as culturally-dependent, many scholars have continued to employ it, provided with an caveat of intended application, as social scientist David Kertzer states in his 1988 work *Ritual, Politics, and Power*:

In defining ritual, I am not, of course, trying to discover what ritual "really" is, for it is not an entity to be discovered. Rather, ritual is an analytical category that helps us deal with the chaos of human experience and put it into a coherent framework. There is no right or wrong definition of ritual, but only one that is more or less useful in helping us understand the world in which we live.<sup>40</sup>

In essence, the appeal of ritual theory within the historical field stemmed from an early twentieth century questioning of the standards of historical scholarship coinciding with the establishment of methodological practices within other social sciences. Whereas anthropology, sociology, and psychology were able to justify their academic validity via intra-disciplinary

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<sup>38</sup> John Bossy, "Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim," *Past and Present* 95 (May, 1982). p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. p. 140.

<sup>40</sup> David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). p. 8.

theories and models, history's methodological problems were assuaged by extending itself outside the traditional limitations of the field, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie stated in 1977:

We historians constitute, in reality, the rear guard of the avant-garde...We historians simply help ourselves to the riches previously accumulated by such fields as economics, demography, and even econometrics...At the same time, not being afflicted with the itch of up-to-the-minute modernity, we are left with the feeling of being heir to a tradition.<sup>41</sup>

While this extension beyond traditional boundaries of the discipline enabled a new focus on previously ignored aspects of historical populations as well as a more cultural and semiotic-based analysis (continuing in the trend away from a diachronic model of the historical narrative), this also exposed history to a range of criticisms, often from the very disciplines with which it was attempting to ally. Ritual theory proved to be one of these aspects of the "new" historiography, utilized by historians increasingly in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet this emergence coincided with anthropology's own crisis concerning what the term "ritual" signified and how it could be applied to modern cultures. In addition to these critiques, history's usage of ritual theory brought about questions of linguistic validity, authorial subjectivism, and the veracity of documents. Historians working in the 1980s, 1990s, and today have attempted to respond to these questions and the field remains to some extent undetermined. Historiography in the last several decades has proven to be the diversification of the historical field and the resulting openness has hitherto yielded no definitive answer as to the validity of ritual theory.

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<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, "Motionless History," *Social Science History* 1, no. 2 (1977), pp. 119-120.

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