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What is This?

Ecological Rites
Ritual Action in Environmental Protest Events

Bronislaw Szerszynski

A S THE political scientist Alberto Melucci has argued, radical social movements operate largely at the level of symbol and meaning. In a highly mediatized information age, power resides largely at the level of control over symbolic codes and schemes of meaning, so it is here that social movements increasingly concentrate their labour. At the level of everyday life, such movements thus act as enclaves of experimentation, within which individuals do not so much satisfy personal needs, but enact different forms of life, forms that rely on the contestation and altering of society's dominant codes. At the public, political level, movements engage primarily in acts of symbolic challenge to dominant understandings – prophecy, paradox, carnivalesque reversal, irony and so on – which make them less like social interests that have to be accommodated, or parties with programmes to be implemented, than signs which society has to interpret to itself (Melucci, 1989, 1996).

I want to suggest this insight of Melucci's, that of the centrality of the symbolic to new social movements, can be further elucidated by using the notion of ritual. Drawing on theoretical understandings of the use of ritual in religious contexts, I want to argue that environmental protest movements draw on strategies of ritualization in order both to help bind the movement together, and also to communicate to wider society. In particular, I will suggest five distinct 'uses' of ritual in environmental protest subcultures, which draw in different ways on the particular significatory and experiential characteristics of ritualized behaviour.[1]

Environmental Protest in the 1990s

Although other examples could have been used in order to explore these questions, including many from outside environmental politics, I will choose to focus on three particular kinds of environmental protest, all seen in Britain in the 1990s. My first example is the wave of direct action protests against the British road-building programme (Doherty, 2000). The first of these protests was at Twyford Down in 1992, which protest saw the emergence of the Dongas tribe, but over the next few years similar protests took place at dozens of rural and also some urban sites across the country. Protesters at these events were typically drawn from two distinct social groupings – local residents, often quite 'establishment' in background and outlook, and young, unemployed and geographically mobile 'eco-warriors', living in 'squats' or in on-site protest camps (Doherty, 1996; McKay, 1996; Seel, 1996).

Typically, such protests took place at a chosen site on the route of a planned bypass or motorway – generally rural and wooded – which was first occupied through the setting up of a protest camp made of home-made shelters called 'benders'. During eviction by the construction company's security guards and police, the protesters would move to tunnels, tree houses or rope walkways, locking themselves on using handcuffs or bicycle 'D-locks'. After eviction, during the construction process, there would be harrying of construction workers and the occupation or 'monkey-wrenching' of construction plant such as earth movers. Finally, rituals of lament often took place for the loss of the trees and habitats.[2] Such actions saw a number of tactical innovations. For example, *lock-ons* – originally involving protesters inserting an arm into a tube and handcuffing themselves to a bar set into concrete at the other end – first achieved prominence during the urban protests against the M11 extension in East London, but have undergone a fairly constant process of refinement in later protests. *Walkways*, created by suspending ropes between trees or houses, were frequently used in road protests, particularly in the case of the impending eviction of more settled 'camps'. *Tunnels*, which protesters constructed to enable locking on underground, were first used at Fairmile to delay the use of heavy plant during the construction of the new route for the A30, and rose to further public prominence in 1997 during the protests against the third runway at Manchester Airport (Doherty, 1997, 2000).

Second, at about the same time the closely related protest movement Reclaim the Streets (RTS) emerged in London. From the beginning RTS also focused on the car, but less as a destroyer of rural habitats and more as a 'condensing symbol' for the general inhuman priorities of consumer capitalism. First formed in 1991, RTS in its earlier years carried out a number of protest actions drawing on protest repertoires not dissimilar to those employed by older organizations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth (FoE) – the ritual smashing of cars in public places, and the painting of bicycle lanes on London streets, for example. After a two-year gap resulting from RTS's absorption into the wider direct action protests

against the M11 extension, RTS re-emerged in 1995. As well as other RTS protests, 1995 saw the birth of the RTS 'street party', where motorized traffic in urban streets is halted, and the resultant spaces 'reclaimed' temporarily by crowds enjoying sound systems, jugglers, street theatre and a general air of festivity and pleasure. Two such Street Parties took place in that year, followed by the M41 street party of July 1996, which involved 8,000 people, sound systems and food stalls, and stopped motorway traffic for eight hours (Anonymous, 1997). RTS protests produced their own tactical innovation in the introduction to the UK of the 'tripod', where a protester is suspended from a tripod of three ten-foot scaffolding poles. Imported from Australian rainforest protests, this tactic was first used in the UK to stop traffic in 1995 in Greenwich by RTS, and tripods have since been used at many RTS events (Doherty, 2000: 69). More recently, RTS networks have become centrally involved in major urban protests against global capitalism, such as in London in June 1999 and Seattle in November 1999.

Third, I also want to illustrate the use of ritual in environmental protest with reference to actions undertaken by the international non-governmental organization (NGO) Greenpeace, in particular its occupations of the abandoned Brent Spar oil platform in 1995. Greenpeace was founded in Canada as the Don't Make a Wave Committee in 1969, and renamed as Greenpeace in 1971. Greenpeace UK was first founded in 1977, in effect as a radical splinter group from Friends of the Earth UK, but by 1991 it had grown into a large, professionally run organization, itself part of a multinational environmental campaigning body, with a UK supporter base of 400,000 (Pearce, 1991). From the beginning, Greenpeace was always characterized by a number of key orientations that set it apart from other environmental NGOs. First, from the Quakers, who had themselves tried to sail boats into nuclear testing zones, it took the idea of 'bearing witness' against wrongdoing. This gave it its enduring commitment to the taking of direct action against environmental 'villains' (Pearce, 1991: 19). Second, even more so than Friends of the Earth, it was oriented towards the media. Greenpeace, perhaps more than any of the major NGOs, has been aware of the inventive nature of its role, giving shape and symbolic substance to wider social tensions and resonances (Grove-White, 1991: 441). The Brent Spar, destined to be sunk in the North Atlantic by Shell, was chosen by Greenpeace to stand as a symbol for dominant industrial attitudes to the world's oceans, which seemed to regard it primarily as a safe and convenient dumping ground for toxic substances. Greenpeace's military-style seizure of the platform in April, and its eviction and subsequent reoccupation of the platform in May, were carefully stage-managed for maximum media effect, not least through the production of dramatic images of plucky protesters braving water-cannon and helicopters in the middle of the North Sea. The media and public interest generated by the occupations, together with Greenpeace-led consumer boycotts of Shell in Germany and other European countries, resulted in Shell UK publicly abandoning, on 20 June, its original plans for marine disposal of the platform – thereby wrong-footing the UK

government, which had been firmly supportive of the deep-sea disposal
option. The Brent Spar was instead towed to a Norwegian fjord while Shell
explored alternative disposal options (Hansen, 2000; Rose, 1998; Smith,
2000).

What's 'Ritual' about Environmental Protest?

There is no space here substantially to engage with the complex and
contested debates over how 'ritual' ought to be defined. For present
purposes, I take it that behaviour can be called 'ritual' or 'ritualized' if it
has many or all of the following features: that it is repeated, rule-bound
behaviour, referring to an ongoing tradition or otherwise invoking a refer-
ence point transcending the choosing and acting individual; that it is
performed behaviour, executed with a heightened sense of being for display,
to be especially attended to by participants and observers; that it is wholly
or partly non-instrumental or symbolic in nature; and that its communicative
dimensions work primarily through 'condensing symbols' rather than elabor-
ated speech, through connotation rather than denotation.[3]

There are a number of features of such protest activities that suggest
that it may be useful to analyse them as 'ritual' in this sense. First, all of
them exhibit what might be termed a general 'semiotic excess', bearing as
they do a surplus of meaning beyond what might be necessary for their direct
political effectiveness. For example, tactical innovations such as the tripod,
as used in Reclaim the Streets protests and anti-roads occupations, have
been highly effective in disrupting the construction of new roads and
runways, in halting the flow of traffic on existing roads, in extending the life
of protest events, and in helping ensure widespread media coverage (cf.
Road Alert!, 1997: 111–17). However, these forms of action are clearly more
than simply technical innovations, simply means of achieving political
goals, but also serve to dramatize the risk to the protesters (Doherty, 2000),
thus expressing cultural meanings that seem to be at least as significant –
both for the protesters and for their attentive public – as their direct political
effectiveness (Szerszynski, 1999).

Second, and related, such protests manifest an emphasis on visuality,
physical embodiment and connotation in stark contrast to most forms of
politics. Conventionally, modern political action is grounded in the dis-
cursive realm – in beliefs and arguments, propositions and warrants, as
theorized in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1979, 1984). By contrast, much
contemporary environmental protest operates through very different forms
of 'communicative action'. Images rather than factual claims dominate the
diffusion of this form of politics beyond the protesting few: images of a lone
protester clinging to the last tree in a denuded landscape, surrounded only
by police in fluorescent jackets; two semi-naked protesters blowing rams'
horns in lament for Twyford Down, now sliced through for the new road.
These protests translate only with difficulty into discursive media such as
newspapers or radio, but communicate powerfully in visual media such as
television or photojournalism. Such images operate through connotative

meanings and visual rhetorics rather than the narrow denotation of fact and analysis, and ground their legitimacy in the sincerity and commitment of the protester, and in the emotional reactions of the viewer, rather than in discursive warrants that might back up any 'validity claims' being made.

Third, these protests typically take the form – especially but not only as they are reported in the media – of a narrative, often with clearly recognized 'scripts' and 'roles' (Benford and Hunt, 1992). Greenpeace has become very adept at exploiting the 'David and Goliath' image of activists in a rubber dinghy risking their lives in front of a large whaling ship or oil tanker, and used this narrative to great effect in the *Brent Spar* occupations. As Joe Smith points out, the *Brent Spar* affair 'offered the media three ingredients it finds difficult to resist: conflict, event and personality'. A deep conflict between widely different understandings of what industries should be permitted to do with their waste was condensed into a single dramatic event occurring at one place in the North Sea, and one in which clear roles were performed dutifully by Greenpeace, Shell and even the UK government (Smith, 2000: 168).

Fourth, and finally, these protests typically use forms of action that are in some sense charged, marked-out from life as normal. The ritualization of behaviour in religious contexts produces an effect of setting it apart from everyday life, associating it with particular modes and intensities of attention on the part of both participants and spectators (Goethals, 1997: 118–20). Similarly, the protest activities described above frequently seem to involve some kind of overt 'breaching' of the rules of everyday behaviour.[4] For example, the RTS street parties operate through disrupting the 'habitus', the normal, taken-for-granted activities, of the high street or motorway, instead instaurating a temporary festive carnivality (Maples, 2000).

The Uses of Ritual

If I am right to claim above that environmental protests manifest features of ritualization, why should this be the case? Or, to put this question another way, what is ritualization *doing*, culturally speaking, in environmental protests? Drawing on the theoretical understanding of the use of ritual in religious contexts, I want to give a number of different answers to these questions. All the answers relate to the significatory character of ritual, the way that ritualized behaviour can carry meaning in specific ways, and thus perform particular kinds of cultural work on participants and audiences, and on space and time. First, I will argue, ritual is used to set up particular relationships between what is and what could (or ought to) be the case. Second, ritual is used to generalize beyond particular actions, and the performers and objects of these actions, linking them with universal or cosmic meanings. Third, ritual is used because of certain effects of operating through symbol, association and connotation. Fourth, ritual is used to mark out the protest community and its actions from its wider social milieu. Fifth and finally, ritual is used to carve out what I call a 'practical

environment' – a particular segment of space and time made suitable for particular kinds of action and experience.

The Indicative and the Subjunctive

Ritual is a powerful way to set up relationships between, as Victor Turner puts it, the 'indicative' and the 'subjunctive' (Turner, 1977), between what is and what could otherwise be the case. By referring to the subjunctive, a grammatical mode, Turner wanted to point out that within ritual there is typically an expression not just of how things are, but how things *might* be, how things *ought* to be. Clifford Geertz suggested that rituals work by *closing* the gap between the indicative and the subjunctive: '[i]n a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world' (Geertz, 1973: 112).

There are many features of environmental protests that exhibit this closing of the gap between 'the world as lived and the world as imagined'. The protest camp, and the many tribal sociations such as the Dongas that emerged from local conflicts, served not only as instruments of political protest but also as prefigurations of a desired ecological, sustainable society (McKay, 1996). The RTS street party operates through showing a vision of what everyday urban life *could* be like, by staging a carnivalesque 'time-out' from the conventional rhythms of consumerism, and demonstrating their non-inevitability. In the 'moment of madness' (Zolberg, 1972), the moment of greatest intensity in a protest event, the usual social rules have been suspended, participants are able to synchronize themselves and their actions with others, connecting the time of their own concrete actions with the more abstract times of distant and global events. In the moment of protest, the time of concrete human actions can be felt to be linked with the sacred, abstract time of 'world-historical transformation' (Jasper, 1997: 22). This is, then, a politics of prefiguration, which offers utopian moments, partial glimpses in the here-and-now of another possible way of being.

However, within some environmental protests ritual is used to draw attention to, and even *heighten* the gap between the indicative and subjunctive (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998). Two examples can be used to illustrate this. First, through actions such as the Brent Spar occupation, Greenpeace aims to make visible the 'backstage' of industrial behaviour (Goffman, 1959; Meyrowitz, 1985). Through such acts of exposing ecological vice, especially when the exposed behaviour stands in sharp contrast to the professed 'green' credentials of companies, Greenpeace seeks to shame its targets into confession and repentance. Such actions can be seen as sharing many features of the 'shaming' or 'status degradation' rituals that are found in many cultures.[5] Second, the dramatics of the street party serve in a complex way to expose the reality of the coercive power of the state, and the distance of this from widely held normative ideals. 'Soft' forms of domination operating within liberal democracies are difficult to make visible, but the RTS street party and other protests do so by provoking the state to go to ever more elaborate – and often violent – forms of repression (Doherty, 1997: 9).

The Particular and the Universal

Rituals also set up relations between the particular and the universal. Many theorists of ritual have drawn on the semiotics of C.S. Peirce in order to analyse how they do this. Peirce distinguished between three sorts of sign – the icon, the symbol and the index, each of which relates to its referent in different ways (Peirce, 1958). Icons, such as passport photographs, refer to their objects by a relation of visual resemblance. Indexes refer through relations of causation (such as the way a raised temperature functions as a sign of illness) or proximity (for example, a label placed next to a painting is taken to 'refer' to it). Symbols, by contrast, refer by cultural convention – the way flags, for example, are taken to refer to countries, or handshakes to friendliness.

Symbols in this latter, specific sense are the dominant form of semiosis in ritual. And it is partly through the use of this symbolization that the ritualization of behaviour has a generalizing effect, pointing beyond a given utterance or gesture to something larger than itself (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 60–1). This generalizing move is a central feature of environmental protests, not least so that actions can be understood as more than simply the protecting of local interests. The particular tree or habitat that might be being defended in a given action has to be seen as a *synecdoche*, standing in for nature in general.[6] Similarly, Greenpeace was not simply concerned about the direct effects of deep-sea disposal of the Brent Spar platform. It was also concerned about the symbolism of such an act in terms of legitimizing certain attitudes to the sea, and the social side-effects of the validation of this symbolism in terms of future disposal decisions.[7]

But rituals can be strong in *indexical* forms of signification, too (Tambiah, 1979). Rituals are performed by this person, in this place, and at this time. This aspect of ritual semiosis can have a complementary affect, grounding abstract meanings in the particularities of the context in which they are performed. That the Brent Spar has such a powerful status as a symbol of corporate irresponsibility and shortsightedness is a product of the ritualized action that Greenpeace undertook around and on it. Through their dramatic (and highly mediatized) performance of care and heroism in the occupation of the platform, Greenpeace indexically marked out the Brent Spar as an object apparently *worthy* of such care and heroism. As Bell says, '[w]hile ritual-like action is thought to be that type of action that best *responds* to the sacred nature of things, in actuality, ritual-like action effectively *creates* the sacred by explicitly differentiating such a realm from a profane one' (Bell, 1997: 156–7).

Just as the symbolic and the indexical, the generalizing and the particularizing, coexist in most rituals, so they coexist in most environmental protests. This is hardly surprising, given the need for such protests to link the particular with the general. However, some rituals and some protests are more indexical than others. Roy Rappaport's distinction between canonical and indexical rituals is useful here (Rappaport, 1993). As ideal types,

canonical rituals are impersonal, and evoke the sense of a cosmic order; indexical rituals, by contrast, refer to present situations, needs and intentions. In this sense, protest actions, particularly those by neo-tribal environmental groups such as the Dongas of Twyford Down, are highly indexical and idiosyncratic. This is partly because of the category of rituals to which these protests belong. Whereas most ritual engagements with nature in premodern cultures were periodic, calendric rituals, performed at particular times of year, environmental protests are occasional rites, and, in particular, rituals of 'affliction' – rituals that are chosen as responses to particular situations of peril (Smith, 1982).[8] Such occasional rituals are generally high in indexical elements, as they have to include reference to particular hazards, unfortunates and possibly persecutors.

But the indexical nature of *some* protests also has a further function, in that it is also expressive of the particular political 'theology' of the group concerned. So, whereas the more militaristic Greenpeace actions are relatively canonical, in that they invoke the tightly controlled Greenpeace *mythos* and worldview through the highly managed use of symbols such as the Greenpeace logo and the rubber dinghy, more anarchistic groups, such as those protesting at Twyford Down and the M11 extension, favour more disorganized, polyvalent styles of protest. Such groups are opposed to the idea of 'party lines' to be assented to – commitment has to be individual, felt in the heart; actions have to be legitimated by being authentically felt rather than being bureaucratically authorized.[9] The latter kind of protest event is thus characterized by more personalized, indexical forms of action, such as acts of home-making during occupations, the weaving of personal effects into fences, and expressions of heightened emotion.[10]

Associative Meanings

If environmental protests employ condensing symbols and connotative forms of communication, why do they do so? I have suggested some reasons for this above, in terms of their role in establishing relationships between particular places, objects and events, and more general and abstract ideas and categories. But here I want to suggest some other, more particular reasons. First, symbolic or associative meanings are used to try to 'hail' the spectator of such protests in particular ways.[11] Here I am drawing on ideas developed independently by Louis Althusser and Michael Polanyi. Althusser's concept of 'hailing' describes the way that subjectivity is shaped by the way that someone is addressed. Hailing 'interpellates' the subject, and as it does so does not just bring it into being as a subject, but also brings it into a certain *kind* of being (Althusser, 1971). Polanyi, in his posthumously published philosophy of meaning, developed a useful analysis of the different ways that the perceiving subject receives different kinds of signs. In his earlier work on personal or implicit knowledge, Polanyi had suggested that, in any activity, certain objects of consciousness are 'focal', in that they are central and capable of articulation, whereas others, no less essential to the activity, nevertheless recede into 'subsidiary' consciousness

(Polanyi, 1962). For example, in riding a bicycle, the direction and speed we want to go are focal, while the complex mechanics of how we achieve that is typically subsidiary. In his lectures on meaning, Polanyi suggested that in different kinds of sign, the signifier (the sign as it is directly perceived) and signified (what the sign means) are distributed in different ways between focal and subsidiary consciousness (Polanyi and Prosch, 1975). In the case of denotative communication such as a road sign, aware-ness typically passes over those parts of the sign-relation that are subsidiary to our consciousness (the words on the sign) to their focal object (say, the way to Doncaster). By contrast, with connotative communication such as a metaphor, awareness typically moves back and forth between the two sides of the sign-relation, borrowing meaning from each side to enrich the under-standing of the other, but also supplements these meanings with the memories and experiences that the subject brings to both elements (Polanyi and Prosch, 1975: 75).

How do these two ideas – that the observing subject is interpellated in particular ways through the way it is addressed, and that in symbolic, connotative communication the observing subject has to do more work in relating signifier to signified and in supplementing the meanings on both sides with their own personal meanings – relate to my examples of environ-mental protest? In protest situations, I want to suggest, the use of ritualized, symbolic actions – the carnivality of the RTS street party, or the dramatic blowing of ram's horns at the motorway cutting at Twyford Down, for example – can be seen partly as attempts to avoid any spectator simply passing over the communicative actions themselves and focusing on the narrow political 'message' that might be taken to be being denoted by the actions. Protest actions seen as connotative rather than denotative would thus be viewed not as simply bearing a message to be agreed with or disagreed with, but as engaging the viewing subject through complex processes of connotation and metaphor in which the meaning of the action, like that of a work of art, cannot be detached from the action itself (cf. Maples, 2000).

This use of symbolization need not in itself create a style of politics that is inimical to thought and reflection. Sherry Ortner distinguishes usefully between *summarizing* and *elaborating* symbols: whereas summariz-ing symbols such as national flags attempt to close down reflection in convergent, canonical meanings, elaborating symbols open up meanings, making them available to reflection and personal interpretation (Ortner, 1973). Unlike summarizing symbols such as those of nationalism, which spectators have to 'complete' by drawing largely on historical, cultural resources, symbolic protest actions tend to work through elaborating symbols, which attempt to call forth personal memories and associations. Dramatic protest actions such as those explored here thus attempt to hail the spectator through metaphor and symbol, involving their own memories and associations in the production of new meanings for themselves as persons and as citizens.[12]

Second, the favouring of connotative rather than denotative forms of

communication seems also to be connected with the frequent non-negotia-
bility of the demands made by environmental and other social movements
(Melucci, 1989, 1996). This resistance to the logic of negotiation and
compromise is characteristic of informal, 'sectarian' environmental groups
such as RTS, but also of Greenpeace, which was famously suspicious of the
many opportunities for round-table dialogues with industry and government
officials in the 1990s. Environmental groups frequently want to present their
demands as belonging to a quite different 'regime of justification' (Boltan-
ski and Thévenot, 1991), and thus not amenable to the negotiation and
bargaining processes that other social demands undergo. Although I have
suggested above that a politics that relies upon symbolization is not necess-
arily hostile to critical thought and multiple meanings, nevertheless ritual-
ization seems to support this move because ritual action is less amenable
to discursive refutation than more denotative forms of communication
(Bloch, 1974). As J.G.A. Pocock observes in relation to Chinese political
ritual, rites have no obvious contraries in the way that truth claims and argu-
ments do (Pocock, 1964). Ritualization in environmental protest thus
produces forms of communicative action that resist incorporation into
conventional justificatory systems.[13] The claims of nature are seen as having
an absolute force, an ultimate claim that breaks into the mundane order of
law and morality.

Marking out Difference

One of ritualization's key characteristics is the way that it seems to mark
out behaviour from its surrounding social fabric. Ritual's capacity to mark
out difference, I would argue, is 'used' in environmental protest in a number
of ways. First, it is used to help to bind the movement together. According
to Michel Maffesoli's analysis of contemporary sociality, radical environ-
mental groups such as those protesting against road building in the 1990s
can be seen as just another manifestation of the shift away from the classic
modern individual, gathering together with others in 'banal associations' in
order to pursue common goals (cf. Mellor and Shilling, 1997), towards a
'neo-tribal' culture structured into new affectual collectivities oriented to
the sheer warmth of fellow-feeling in the here-and-now (Maffesoli, 1996).
In Maffesoli's Durkheimian reading, such neo-tribes exhibit a high degree
of ritualization because of their need to find new ways of producing group
coherence in an age where faith in the idea of politics as a project has all
but collapsed. Whereas in earlier times a sense of commonality could be
provided by the orientation to shared future goals, under contemporary
conditions groups need positively to create the social divine through ritual
celebrations that confirm the group's self-image (1996: 140).

Although it is dangerous to make too close an identification between
neo-tribal social movements on the one hand, and 'style' or leisure subcul-
tures with no goals beyond their own boundaries on the other, nevertheless
Maffesoli pays useful attention to the cultural work that goes on within
political subcultures.[14] Much of this cultural work takes the form of an

aestheticized, style subculture, drawing on punk and hippy lineages, as well as on tribal imagery borrowed from pre-modern, small-scale societies (McKay, 1996). This can be seen as a specific and highly fertile example of the more general use of emblems or 'badges' – formal or informal, mobile or fixed, conventional or representational, ascribed or elective visual symbols that are used to signify membership of a civic or political community (Szerszynski and Urry, 2001). Following Maffesoli's line of analysis, Kevin Hetherington sees the use of style in neo-tribal sociations as 'a means through which identity markers and indications of belonging are expressed' (Hetherington, 1998: 56). Protest actions and more everyday behaviour within the protest subculture are performances of identity 'recognizable to others who share a particular identification' (1998: 142).

The distinction between 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxy' is useful here. *Orthodoxic* religions and cultures place an emphasis on belief, on the assent to propositions and on doctrinal conformity; *orthopraxic* religions, by contrast, place greater stress on external behaviour rather than internal belief. This distinction is a matter of degree, but nevertheless some cultures are more highly ritualized, and regard assent to doctrinal propositions as of secondary importance; in other cultures, doctrinal orthodoxy is central, and ritual is seen as secondary, as merely expressive of doctrine, and in some cases expendable entirely (Bell, 1997: 151ff.; Berling, 1987). In terms of this distinction, the established environmental NGOs can be seen as orthodoxic, in that they place greater stress on proposition and argument, and on having agreed 'positions' within the organization on any given issue.[15] Neo-tribal environmental movements, by contrast, are low on orthodoxy, in that they permit great freedom of belief and have relatively little interest in 'rational' political argument. But such groups are high in orthopraxy, because of their emphasis on style and taste, codes of dress, comportment, shared argots and so on. Our understanding of this can be assisted by reference to the comparative study of religious cultures. Orthodoxic approaches are favoured by traditions that seek to transcend particular ethnic or other subgroups. Orthopraxy is found largely amongst subcultures, including communities such as the Amish within mainstream religions, which define themselves over and against the surrounding dominant culture. Within protest subcultures too, 'stringent ritualization has the powerful effect of tightly binding one to a small community of like-minded people' (Bell, 1997: 193).

Second, ritualization is used to express and perform not just difference *from*, but also a critical attitude *to*, mainstream culture. In neo-tribal environmental movements, utopianism manifests itself not just as a synchronic set of ideas and values, but also as a diachronic, ritual performance. Both in the ongoing, immanent culture of the protest camp, and in the more outward-facing performances that occur in protest events, ideas are made visible through the aestheticized and ritualized performance of what Castells calls 'resistance' or 'project' identities, defined over and against the globalization of capital and power (Castells, 1997: 354–62; Hetherington,

1998: 130). Such performances serve to mark the protesters as a moral elect, inhabiting an enclave within mainstream society at the same time as they stand in critical judgement over it (Szerszynski, 1997).

Third, ritualization is used to mark out the actions of environmental protest groups – whether at Twyford Down, at an RTS event or on the Brent Spar – as being of 'extra-ordinary' significance and legitimacy. The ritualization of behaviour has the general effect of marking it out as privileged in some way, as embodying central cosmological codes for both actors and observers to an extent greater than other behaviour (Bell, 1992: 90). For observers, it is thus a form of 'ostensive' or 'overt' communication, communication that refers to itself and requests heightened modes of attention to be paid to it. But, as well as ritualization serving to signify unusual levels of *importance*, it also serves to signify unusual modes of *legitimacy*. Ritualization is often employed where power and legitimacy are grounded not in a worldly authority, but in a higher moral law. The important symbolic component of many protest actions, such as the heroic last stand, locked-on at the top of a lone tree, can be seen as providing a ritual legitimation to acts that are not granted legitimacy from formal sources of legal authority.[16] The very illegality of many protest actions is thus turned from a sign of illegitimacy into a different mode of legitimation, one deriving its moral force from the personal risk the actor is prepared to undertake to underwrite their commitment to protect nature.[17]

Creating Practical Environments

Ritualization is also used in environmental protest because of its cultural power to constitute what might be called a 'practical environment' – a segment of space and time, ordered through particular schemes of meaning, which make it afford particular kinds of actions and experiences.[18] First, ritualization provides a powerful mechanism for marking out the boundaries of, and thus bringing into being, a bounded segment of space-time, in relation to which participants are made aware that they are entering a space where different rules apply.[19] For example, protest dramas such as those being discussed here take place in a cut-out segment of time. Turner describes the duration of such social dramas as taking place in a *limen* or threshold, a passage between two states of stability and quiescence (Turner, 1974). One could say that the whole protest drama itself takes place in an 'intercalary' segment of time, a time taking place outside the mundane calendar where the usual rules have been temporarily repealed. Before the protest starts, the routine of everyday life is proceeding as usual; then comes the moment of breach, instigating the protest narrative; then, after the close of the protest event, routine is resumed once more (Szerszynski, 1999). The ritualization of behaviour gives it the power to mark and enact those moments of breach, to signal that a different time segment is being entered or exited.

Second, ritualization is also used to order space and time in a particular way *within* the cut-out segment, structuring it according to a given

dramaturgy, script and characters (Benford and Hunt, 1992; Kershaw, 1992). Protest groups use the power of ritual not just to communicate *ideas* but also to create and define *situations* (Valeri, 1985). In one of the many 'hermeneutic circles' occurring within ritual, ritually informed actors use gestures and actions to qualitatively structure the environment around them, and then experience and re-embody these schemes of meaning by moving within its spatial and temporal dimensions (Bell, 1997: 81). Experienced protesters can be seen as 'ritually informed actors' in this sense, actors who, through their bodily internalization of a protest *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990), are able to structure the 'practical environment' of the protest camp or event, which structuring in turn serves to enable skilled protest perform-ances.[20]

  Third, such ritualization processes play a powerful role in experien-tially revalidating protest events for the participants. The meaningful 'situ-ations' that rituals create and define are ones that serve to reproduce key meanings in participants (Valeri, 1985). These key meanings are then vali-dated through an experience of what Catherine Bell calls 'redemptive hegemony' (Bell, 1992: 83–4), whereby the validity of an embodied interpretation of the world is confirmed through the experience of moving through a world which has been interpreted and ritually ordered through the application of that schema. For example, individuals who join in with a protest event without particularly strong assent to the 'cause' of the protest may come to feel more strongly the rightness of the cause through partici-pating in a situation structured according to the key meanings of the movement. After bodily participating in symbolic protest events, key meanings of the movement can be dually validated, through an external and an internal report, by recalling exterior states of affairs and interior states of emotion.[21] The external report derives its power to the extent that events seemed to confirm the key meanings of the movement's worldview – for example, through direct experience of the state's coercive power. The internal report relates to the experience of 'flow' as one loses oneself in the protest moment (Callois, 1959; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) in proportion to the closeness of 'fit' between internal dispositions and the external 'practical environment' of the protest event, to the degree that the protest *habitus* has been internalized.

Conclusion – The Use of Ritual

I began this article by referring to the insight of Albert Melucci that contem-porary social movements are characterized by an emphasis on the symbolic. I suggested that the symbolic dimension of social movement praxis might better be understood by seeing it as the product of the ritualization of different aspects of protest behaviour. This ritualization, I went on to argue, serves a number of functions within protest events and subcultures: setting up relations of proximity or distance between the world as it is and the world as imagined; establishing relationships between particular actions and abstract ideas and ideals; carrying meaning in connotative ways in order to

resist their incorporation into conventional political exchange; marking out protest actions and subcultures as critically distant from mainstream society; and creating practical environments which structure actions and experiences within them.

My analysis has emphasized the symbolic dimension of what is already a highly symbolic politics. In doing so, I could be seen to be insulating it from critique: if rites have no contrary, how can one argue against a ritualized politics, one that repeatedly if not always avoids conventional 'rational' argument? Certainly, an implication of my analysis is that this kind of politics at least should not *solely* be judged according to the arguments, analyses and programmes it does – or indeed does not – possess. A ritual politics has a different kind of logic, one whose 'felicity conditions' – the conditions which determine whether it should be judged to succeed or not – might be quite different to those obtaining in the conventional understanding of modern politics.[22] However, a ritual, symbolic politics is not impervious to criticism; indeed, there is much that *can* be criticized in contemporary environmental politics. But the mode of criticism employed has to be one that treats ritual processes as central rather than peripheral.[23]

Notes

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1. I am deliberately choosing not to include within my analysis the fairly widespread overt use of pagan rituals and symbols in environmental protests during this period, since my interest here is in the way that apparently secular forms of political action can be analysed as ritual.

2. And also for the loss of tree houses, which might have become home to the protesters over many months.

3. For useful overviews of these debates see the work of Catherine Bell (1992, 1997), to which the present article is particularly indebted.

4. Elsewhere I refer to this kind of political action as 'prophetic' (Szerszynski, 1997, 1999). According to Richard Fenn, prophetic talk is 'serious' or 'operative' speech that has in some sense 'leaked out' from its usual liturgical setting into wider social life (Fenn, 1982: 104).

5. The notion of shaming and degradation rituals has been applied practically to legal contexts such as youth crime (Braithwaite, 1989; Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994), and analytically to episodes of political scandal and excommunication (Alexander, 1988; Carey, 1998).

6. On the importance for political discourse of the generalizing move whereby the specific case at hand is framed as standing for a wider class of possible objects of concern, see Boltanski (1999: 5–7).

7. Although this generalizing move was ultimately unsuccessful in terms of influencing the way that the campaign was reported in the media – see Smith (2000).

8. It would be dangerous to overdraw this contrast, since many calendric rituals (such as those at mid-winter) were also understood as averting danger.

9. Greenpeace activists share this kind of orientation to their actions, which can be in some tension with the more routinized style of politics undertaken by the more desk-bound campaigners at head office.

10. For a use of the concept of 'dramaturgy' to contrast the more traditional marches of earlier decades with contemporary styles of protest, which in contrast seem to lack clear demands, programmes or enemies, see Kershaw (1997).

11. The hailing of opponents, rather than of accidental spectators, is sometimes the primary goal of protests. Doherty et al. (2000: 2) usefully distinguish two logics in the 'bearing of witness' in direct action – applying political pressure through appeals to an audience, and appealing to the better nature of opponents.

12. How far contemporary protests actually succeed in achieving this is another matter.

13. See here Bloch (1974) on the way that the formalization of linguistic and non-linguistic communication in ritual removes it from the possibility of refutation and argument characteristic of 'ordinary' speech. As he points out, however, the decreased 'propositional force' of ritual speech is accompanied by an increased 'illocutionary force'.

14. For a development of this criticism of Maffesoli's approach, see Szerszynski (1999).

15. Of course, they too police behaviour, but this in a way which, in most cases, aligns them with wider 'respectable' society, rather than marks them out as different in the way that orthopraxic religious subcultures do.

16. Here I am departing slightly from the analysis of Maurice Bloch (1974), for whom the ritualization of communication is inextricably bound to traditional forms of authority, in Weber's sense. At least in the context of modern, Western societies, rather than ritualization always serving the interests of traditional authorities against the possibility of legal-rational challenge from liberal-democratic institutions and practices, I am suggesting, it can also be used by groups challenging the legitimacy of these institutions from *below*. Similarly, rather than ritual always serving to hide reality and exclude explanation, as argued by Bloch, it can also be used to *disclose* aspects of reality that have been excluded by society's dominant framings (Lukes, 1974; Melucci, 1989: 60).

17. On the importance of personal 'cost' in legitimating political action in modern societies, see Boltanski (1999: 70).

18. The concept of 'affordance' here comes from the ecological psychology of James Gibson (1979).

19. On the importance of marked-out time segments in everyday experience, see Szerszynski (forthcoming).

20. This is, of course, an idealization – this ritual structuring of the protest event can obviously 'fail' in many different ways.

21. On the use of internal and external reports in politics, see Boltanski (1999: ch. 5).

22. 'Felicity conditions' is a term coined by J. Austin (1962) in his discussion of speech acts, with the coinage of which he sought to indicate that, whereas truth claims may stand or fall by their empirical accuracy, other utterances such as

promises have radically different determinants of their 'success' or 'failure'. I am suggesting that this may also be the case with different forms of political action.
23.   Ronald Grimes (1990) has suggested something similar with his notion of 'ritual criticism'.

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