

## LIMINALITY AND THE MODERN: Living through the In-Between

By Bjørn Thomassen. Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2014, 263.

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This volume summarizes years of study anchored in the history of anthropology, political and philosophical anthropology. The book is more than a collection of papers in different fields of interest, as Bjørn Thomassen creates a synthesis based on his thorough research in the history of anthropology and sociology. The author mainly focuses on how the term *liminality* was introduced, neglected, and rediscovered and on how one could further unfold its potential as an analytical tool for the study of long-term macro-level social changes. Some of the chapters therefore present interconnected case studies. The author presents a general analysis of modernity. By applying the term *liminality*, Thomassen attempts to prove how different historical and contemporary cultural phenomena can be understood as being situated in a never-ending liminal state, how the general modern human experience is characterized by an empty, never-ending need, an unfulfilled desire, and finally how the program of modernity deep at its root is about a constant overcoming of boundaries, limits, and fixed ideas on all levels of human existence.

The book is composed of two large parts that total eight chapters, which are framed by an introduction and concluding ninth chapter. The first part mainly explores the use of the term *liminality* in the history of anthropology, drawing Arnold van Gennep's detailed, approving intellectual portrait and laying out the theoretical principles of the book. The second part, consisting of four different case studies, investigates how the concept of liminality and some other concepts introduced in the previous part can be applied to different cultural phenomena of modernity.

Throughout the volume the concept of liminality is comprehended in a broader sense, understood not only in the narrower context of rites of passage but also of any social action that includes the element of change. While praising Victor Turner's contribution to the concept of liminality, Thomassen criticizes Turner's approach on a few points, most importantly, for romanticizing the concept and forgetting the problematic nature of liminality. Thomassen demonstrates that Turner, because of his sympathy for the postmodern program, used liminality not only as an analytical tool but also as a normative one, praising its value for breaking rigid structures, and for bringing forth creativity and freedom. Opposed to this, Thomassen underlines that besides the bright side, there is also a darker side of liminality, as this fundamentally open, fluctuating state of being potential can bring forth all the extreme manifestations of the otherwise hidden elements of human nature. Thomassen reflects on his move away from van Gennep's original idea of liminality as he sets out the aim of the book as an investigation of liminality on the larger scale of society.

Probably it is Thomassen's case study on bungee jumping that, as metaphor, best describes his intellectual approach toward modernity. Modernity, like extreme sport, is obsessed with the breaking of boundaries, but as a project it fails because it jumps into nothingness, there is no climax to reach, no other side, no stability, no structure, no home to return to, only the void left by meaning: liminality is taken over by the limivoid. Bungee jumping mimics the premodern forms of jumping rituals, but in contrast to these, in bungee jumping there is no transmission because there is no master of ceremonies, no one with the authority and knowledge to lead the neophyte. Modernity, by withdrawing certitude to the self, sets out to undermine such certainties. By divesting the external reference points it leaves one vulnerable to the misguidance of trickster figures. Liminality unleashes sexuality, violence, play, laughter, emotions, and activities that, according to Thomassen, are the fundamentals of our present, modern state of being.

Briefly, the title could therefore be summarized as an attempt to describe modernity as a state of permanent liminality. To prove his point, Thomassen introduces the already mentioned four

case studies addressing conventional anthropological topics (leisure, play, rituals, politics and philosophy) from an unorthodox perspective. This position is twofold. First, at the level where we usually apply a very individualistic approach toward culture, the author uses a structural method. Second, he steps outside the micro level (understood as the dimensions of space, time, and agency) where most anthropological studies remain. Allow me to briefly detail these two methods.

Thomassen examines the works and ideas of some of the great figures of Western philosophy (mainly Descartes, Hobbes, and Kant) from the standpoint of large-scale changes in European society. He treats philosophical legacies as indirect answers to the liminal historical periods in which the authors lived. Reading Descartes and Hobbes, Thomassen argues that by reversing the structure of revelation, the two profoundly liminal emotions of endless doubt and fear are embedded in their legacies. It is in this sense that they are founders of the project of modernity.

The other case studies in the volume follow a different, but similarly original approach in trying to apply the insights and concepts of anthropology at the macro level. Still, the studies on gambling and bungee jumping rather have rhetorical value because the chapters lack an empirical basis. The chapter on games opens with a personal anecdote in which the author attempts to depict how gambling spreads. Apart from being stylistically alien from the rest of the title this memory itself does not prove that gambling is either more popular or problematic. In this chapter the rest of the arguments and the application of the concept of the liminal and the trickster seem rather forced and incomprehensive.

It is in the chapter on political revolutions that Thomassen launches and applies his full analytical apparatus. This is probably the most innovative section of the book with ripe potential for future analysis. To understand revolutions the author applies not only the term *liminality* but also the concepts of imitation, schismogenesis, and trickster. Thomassen thoroughly examines the liminal characters of revolution. He depicts how masters of ceremonies are lacking, and how this enables cynical trickster figures to disguise themselves as leaders, how they provoke schismogenesis between members of the crowd, and how imitation leads to the escalation of events. All in all Thomassen sheds new light on revolutions, which are not depicted as rational, conscious attempts to overcome certain social conflicts but rather as escalating, uncontrollable liminal events. Also this chapter clearly verifies that anthropology does have something valid to say on the macro level. Finally, Thomassen's concluding remarks on the liminal, revolutionary origins of the political system of modernity is certainly something that has to be taken into account in conflict and political theory.

The book is a good read, and its train of thought is easy to follow. Some parts of the text even have literary value and from time to time small, sarcastically witty remarks make it even more enjoyable to peruse. The arguments are theoretically well-founded and the volume presents a coherent idea of liminality and its role in modernity. Thomassen clearly follows the line of thinkers who see modernity as a fundamental fracture in the history of mankind. Thomassen wishes to introduce a general understanding of this radically different, modern state of being, to describe a commonly shared reality. The problem with this scientific project is that it leaves no place for differentiation, and thus misses the very essence of anthropology—its ability to delineate cultural diversity. The model is also rather deterministic, as liminality becomes a base while culture in general becomes a superstructure. As original as it is, the way Thomassen bestows priority on liminal events as factors forming the ideas of some of the key figures of Western philosophy much resembles Sartre's naive materialist who understood Spinoza's intellectual legacy as a reflection of the state of the grain market of the Netherlands. Despite these points, Thomassen's monograph remains an inspiring, unconventional attempt to apply the notions of anthropology

to new fields, levels, and scales of culture and society, enabling anthropology to be a tool of both cultural analysis and cultural criticism.

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### **AFTER WAR: The Weight of Life at Walter Reed**

By Zoë Wool. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 264 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 9780822360032.

In *After War*, Zoë Wool shares the results of a year's worth of research with some of the most grievously wounded veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan staying at the emblematic Walter Reed Medical Center. In doing so, Wool makes a valuable contribution to the modest, albeit growing literature on the lived experience of injured veterans and (some of) the fleshy consequences of continuously sending young men and women off to war. Through ethnographic acuity, Wool reveals how veterans and loved ones navigate a physical and discursive terrain that is marked by the extraordinariness that one intuitively associates with matters of life and death *and* a slow process of rehabilitation mired in excruciating boredom.

The story told is one of nonclosure, of becoming that which one is not now. Wool's exposition of the simultaneous emergence and emergency empathetically reflects what is at stake in the lives of her interlocutors. However, her corpo-real writing of callusing social relations and blistering emotions inspired by Elizabeth Povinelli (2001; 2006; 2011) and her choice of genre sometimes works against her ambitions. Wool does what she does brilliantly, but the reader often finds herself at a strange remove from what should be so intimate, as Wool's own eloquent analytical reflections overshadow the expressions of her interlocutors; a remarkable feature in an exploration pigeonholed as phenomenological.

Before embarking on her ethnographic journey, Wool provides a few analytical disclaimers. Among these is the fact that she does not and will not offer any blanket moral condemnation or blame-placing, as is often the case in anthropological writings on the American military. This invariably makes *After War* a very different kettle of fish from the much-lauded critical work of, for instance, Matthew Gutmann and Catherine Lutz (2010); Lutz (2001). This does not mean that *After War* is amoral—not by any stretch—and on more than one occasion Wool moves the reader to join in on the moral contemplation, both personal and political in kind, that seems to undergird her entire project. All said, we found this nonsubversive inclination to make for a refreshing and different kind of war story.

In chapter 1, Wool demonstrates how everyday life at Walter Reed (WR) is marked by perpetual tensions between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Despite the best of intentions as well as meticulous consideration of American middle-class values in design and decoration of The Fisher House, a nonprofit foundation's ambition to provide "a home away from home" for soldiers undergoing hospital treatment, offers at best a "domestic simulacra" (p. 28). To this end, constant charity donations, official visits, staged photo shoots, and support events transform intimate spaces into a "publicized domesticity" (p. 32) circumscribed by political and patriotic agendas. Similarly, soldiers' embodied contingencies challenge the idealized therapeutic trajectories of rehabilitation. As Wool shows, the precariousness of the soldiers' bodies, which call for endless surgical remolding and demand their constant attention and labor, pervade everyday life, and come to structure a new ordinary among injured soldiers. This opening chapter is a