

## CHAPTER 1



# THE PIVOTING OF THE SACRED

## Arnold van Gennep's Spatio-temporality of the Liminal

Bjørn Thomassen

Life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the threshold of summer and winter, of season or a year, of a month or of a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife – for those who believe in it.

—Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*.

While Arnold van Gennep is routinely referred to as the author who detected and named a seemingly universal pattern present in rites of passage, the larger process-oriented analytical framework within which he elaborated this insight has been largely ignored. Indeed, even Victor Turner seemingly remained unaware of van Gennep's larger oeuvre. This can partly be explained by the fact that van Gennep's work was – with the exception of *Rites of Passage* – never translated into English, and partly by the more general lack of reception of his work by sociologists and anthropologists, even in France.

In this chapter I will briefly try to situate van Gennep's larger approach, and in that context also rehearse his significant critique of the Durkheimian school of sociology and anthropology, a critique that allowed van Gennep to situate his own approach as belonging to the 'life sciences'.<sup>1</sup> As I read it, engaging this legacy would have helped Turner to sustain his own endeavours toward an anthropology of experience. My larger argument follows our recent attempt (Szokolczai and Thomassen 2019) to position Arnold van Gen-

nep as a ‘maverick anthropologist’ of importance for anthropological and social theory writ large, today perhaps more than ever.

In the second part of the chapter, I will highlight the importance van Gennep attributed to spatiality in his very understanding of liminal rites and liminality as such, evident in his discussion of ‘the sacred zones’ and ‘the sanctity of a passage’ (*Les divinités du passage*). I would here like to call attention to the fact that in his famous book, *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep actually introduces another notion that in my reading is absolutely crucial if we want to understand the place of the liminal in the wider terminology he elaborated, namely the ‘pivoting of the sacred’. This relates to the question of temporality as well, and what one could call van Gennep’s spatio-temporal ‘rhythmic framework’. As a conclusion I will tentatively suggest that it might even be possible to recast secularization theory in this light.

## Rereading Arnold van Gennep

In 1960, when *Rites of Passage* was finally translated into English, very few people knew about van Gennep. To some extent the same could be said today. However, some previous attempts to take up and revalorize his work should be mentioned, as they in various ways speak to a central concern of this present book, which is how to capture the dynamics of transition and the role of power herein. In 1981 a workshop was organized in Neuchâtel, in recognition of Arnold van Gennep’s pivotal role for Swiss folklore and ethnology. An edited volume (Centlivres and Hainard 1986) was published as a follow-up to that conference, with a collection of chapters with contributions from the then rather small group of van Gennep experts, including Nicole Belmont, who in 1974 had published a book in French on Arnold van Gennep as ‘the creator of French ethnology’, later translated into English (Belmont [1974] 1979). Bourdieu gave, for the purpose, a paper with – in my view – very unfortunate consequences for the wider reception history of van Gennep, as he attempted to inject an institutional power perspective into van Gennep’s notion of rite of passage. I will briefly return to this below.

In 1982 a workshop was held in Jerusalem on ‘Comparative Liminality and Dynamics of Civilizations’, with Shmuel Eisenstadt and Victor Turner as the main protagonists. With hindsight, this can be considered a more productive event. Eisenstadt pushed his theoretical insights, as the dimension of liminality helped him to better conceptualize the jointly order-maintaining and order-transforming dimensions of culture (see Eisenstadt 1995); Turner, in his turn, was further stimulated towards an engagement with macro-politics, although he had little time to elaborate on it more thoroughly, as he passed away less than two years later.

In 2009 a workshop on liminality was held at Cambridge, celebrating the one hundred years of AvG's *Rites de Passage*. This workshop led to a special issue in IPA, International Political Anthropology (2009), and then to the edited volume, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015). The book is an exploration of the potentiality of the liminality concept outside more narrowly defined ritual contexts, in many ways taking up many of the suggestions left behind in Victor Turner's work, in particular Turner's allusions to liminal situations at the macro level.

More recently, in 2016, again in Jerusalem, another workshop was held, this time focusing on the book itself, *Rites de Passage*, and how to reread it today: 'Reclaiming Arnold van Gennep's Rites de Passage'. This led to a precious special issue in Journal of Classical Sociology in 2018 (volume 18, issue 4), edited by Nitzan Rothen and Shlomo Fischer. What I argue in the second part of this chapter is inspired by discussions that took place at that workshop, and especially by the paper given at that occasion by Nicole Hochner, later published as one of the articles in the special issue (Hochner 2018).

Common to these endeavours is a recognition that van Gennep's work has been neglected for too long, a recognition behind many of the chapters of this book as well. Since relatively little is still known about van Gennep, and the reasons behind this neglect, let me briefly try to situate his life and work before I proceed with my own argument.

### **Arnold van Gennep and His Work: A Short Introduction**

Arnold van Gennep was born as Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep on 23 April 1873 in Ludwigsburg, Württemberg.<sup>2</sup> When he was six years old, his parents separated and van Gennep moved with his mother to Lyons, France, where she remarried. In 1892, van Gennep moved to Paris and enrolled at *L'École des langues orientales* to study Arabic, and at *L'École pratique des hautes études* to study general linguistics and Egyptology, as he also had a passion for prehistory, a field that was just emerging at that time, and was surrounded with heated controversies. He also enrolled for lectures at *Sciences religieuses* where he studied primitive religion and Islamic culture. Here he came into contact with Antoine Meillet, a linguist and a member of the Durkheim circle, and Marcel Mauss, who was just one year older than van Gennep. Van Gennep graduated in 1896 from *L'École des Langues Orientales*, and initiated a career as a translator. One of his first translations, in 1898, was Frazer's immensely influential book on totemism.<sup>3</sup>

After a four-year stay in Russian Poland from 1897 to 1901, van Gennep returned to Paris. From 1901 to 1908, he was employed full-time as head of translations at the French Ministry of Agriculture. His linguistic skills were,

by then, second to none. In an article from 1927, discussing the use of the subconscious in the study of living languages, he purports to master eighteen languages plus a number of their dialects, including Arabic, Finnish, and several Slavic languages (Belmont 1979: 7). Van Gennep's formal career was now unfolding outside academia. In addition to his ministerial position, he kept on translating and editing. For over thirty years, from 1906 to 1939, he edited the section 'Ethnographie-Folklore-Religions-Préhistoire' in *Mercur de France*.

Van Gennep studied *sciences religieuses* with Léon Marillier at *L'École pratique*, becoming part of that handful of young people who were later to become Durkheim's collaborators, among them Mauss, Henri Hubert and Paul Fauconnet. Upon Marillier's sudden death in 1901, Mauss became van Gennep's teacher and mentor. In 1903, Mauss proofread and thoroughly annotated van Gennep's thesis on taboo and totemism in Madagascar. Van Gennep's interests during the first decade of the century developed alongside those of the Durkheimians, and included the classical topics of totemism, taboo, the origins and nature of religion, magic, classification systems, and the relationship between myth and ritual.

In 1904 van Gennep published his thesis, *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar: étude descriptive et théorique*. The book is dedicated to the memory of Léon Marillier, and in its preface van Gennep reserves his final thanks for 'mon ami Marcel Mauss' (van Gennep 1904: 2). Van Gennep here analysed totemism as a social system of classification, taking its role far beyond the narrow field of religion. In 1906 he published his second book, *Mythes et légendes d'Australie*, where he openly exposed the problems in Durkheim's work. In 1909 he published *Rites de Passage*, the work that was to become his post-mortem claim to fame. Herein, van Gennep proposed a conceptual classification of all existing rites. He distinguished between rites that mark the passage of an individual or social group from one status to another from those that mark transitions in the passage of time (e.g. harvest, new year), whereupon he went on to explore 'the basis of characteristic patterns in the order of ceremonies' (van Gennep 1960: 10). The sequential structure of rites is the central theoretical innovation of van Gennep. However, far from proclaiming originality, he is rather perplexed as to why nobody had before realized this simple fact, with Robert Hertz, the most important student of Mauss, being acknowledged as sole predecessor. The ritual pattern was apparently universal: all societies use rites to demarcate transitions. Van Gennep himself considered the book his breakthrough, resulting from an 'inner illumination' (Belmont 1979: 58). The conceptual framework guided everything he wrote thereafter.

In 1908, during his writing of *Rites de Passage*, van Gennep decided to quit his job at the ministry and to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to aca-

demia, founding the scientific journal *La Revue des études ethnographiques et sociologiques* in which he would publish frequently, while serving as its director. Also in 1908, he published a book on Homeric poetry (*La Question d'Homère*) and the first volume of *Religions, mœurs et légendes: Essais d'ethnographie et de linguistique*, a collection of essays on religion, myth and ritual. In 1909 the second volume of *Religions, mœurs et légendes* was released, and the flow of van Gennep's articles, reviews and translations continued. The bibliography, compiled by his daughter Ketty, lists a total of 437 publications (K. van Gennep 1964).

In 1910 van Gennep published *La Formation des légendes*, his seventh book. It was followed by two books in 1911: *Les Demi-Savants*,<sup>4</sup> and the third volume of *Religions, mœurs et légendes*. Van Gennep had, by then, become deeply engaged with general epistemological and methodological issues. Before the First World War he published a series of programmatic articles wherein he denounced problems in contemporary 'scientific' approaches, starting to formulate a methodological platform for the social sciences that he christened 'biological sociology'. In the same period (1910–11) he also carried out two rounds of ethnographic fieldwork in Algeria (see Sibeud 2004). Although this project – to study art forms – was only partially successful, several lengthy publications resulted from it, not least of which is his 1914 book *En Algérie*.

Despite his productivity, van Gennep never passed the threshold into French academia. Following unsuccessful candidatures at the Collège de France in 1907, 1909 and 1911, he decided to go abroad (Belmont 1979: 11). In 1912 he was offered the first (and only) academic position he ever held, as chair in Swiss ethnography at the University of Neuchâtel. Upon his arrival, he started to plan a founding event for the European social sciences: the major international conference held at Neuchâtel in the summer of 1914, weeks before the outbreak of the First World War. More than six hundred social scientists attended this, the biggest-ever networking event for European social scientists until then – and probably one of the most significant of such events ever, bridging across the social sciences. Topics discussed included basic terminological and methodological issues, as well as attempts to delineate boundaries to neighbouring disciplines. The goals of the conference were explicitly programmatic: what should the social sciences look like, which tasks should we set ourselves, and how are they to be carried out? Marcel Mauss was part of the French delegation, and gave a paper on taboo among the Baronga (Zerilli 1998). Durkheim did not show up, but he likely got a detailed résumé from Mauss, who together with his uncle was then working on a plan for ethnographic studies in France.

In October 1915 van Gennep was expelled from Switzerland because of his criticism of the Swiss government and its pro-German attitudes. Un-

able to get an academic job in France, he was recalled by Raymond Poincaré (cousin of the famous physicist and mathematician, Henri Poincaré) to a post in the French Foreign Office. Still, he continued to advance his academic work. He wrote several pieces on the war, in a style that comes close to the war-writings of Mauss (van Gennep 1915). He only managed to finish the first of a planned three-volume series on nationalism, published in 1922, but actually anticipated an anthropological approach to the question of borders and boundaries as differentiating factors of cultural identity, later to be taken up by Fredrik Barth and others. On 24 January 1921, at the age of 47, Arnold van Gennep became *Docteur ès Lettres* at the Sorbonne. He presented two works for the title: his book from 1920 on totemism (*L'État actuel du problème totémique*) and *Rites de Passage*. He received a *mention très honorable* (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl was on the committee). These two books presented for the *Docteur* title are hugely substantial contributions. The book on totemism actually paved the way for Claude Lévi-Strauss's approach to totemic classification (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 35–36), and can indeed be considered a precursor to a 'structural' understanding of religion and society (Senn 1974); *Rites de Passage*, presented as a 'minor', is easily one of the most important anthropology books ever written.

In 1922, van Gennep was invited to give a lecture tour in the United States and Canada. This forced him to quit his job at the ministry, the last salaried full-time position he would ever hold. There seem to be no accounts testifying to his impact in America. Van Gennep actually did break another record for the time, as he performed eighty-six lectures within a few months – practically one per day across the entire continent. Upon his return from America, he fell ill. He decided to give up academic ambitions, and to settle down with his wife as a chicken-breeder in southern France. Yet his questioning mind could not rest, and within a year he returned to Paris. Van Gennep now turned to folklore, a discipline that he almost single-handedly built up over the next three decades, working unsalaried and alone in his home, an apartment in Bourg-la-Reine, until his death in 1957. Despite never holding an academic position in France, van Gennep would become known as the 'father of French folklore'. And while that is true, this reputation hides away his earlier attempts to give shape to anthropology and the social sciences writ large. This neglect of van Gennep's broader legacy has everything to do with his intellectual battle with Emile Durkheim.

## Van Gennep's Critique of Durkheim

I rehearse all the above facts, in all their triviality, simply to indicate that we cannot limit van Gennep's contribution to his classification of rites. Today's

reception of van Gennep is still influenced by the way in which his work was sidelined by the Durkhemians in his own lifetime, a misreading that has only been perpetuated throughout the twentieth century. The two most conspicuous examples of such misreadings are indeed Claude Levi-Strauss and Pierre Bourdieu. That belongs to a larger discussion, but my argument is that their misreading in both cases point not to shortcomings of van Gennep but rather to problematic aspects in their own theoretical approach. For the purposes of this book, Bourdieu's reception of van Gennep is the most relevant one (on Levi-Strauss, see Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019: 30–33). Bourdieu's misreading is most visible in his almost scandalous treatment of van Gennep in the 'homage paper', published as 'Les rites comme actes d'institution' in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (Bourdieu 1982) and reprinted in *Ce que parler veut dire*, and then translated into English as 'Rites of Institution', and published as a chapter in *Language and Symbolic Power* (Bourdieu 1992: 117–26). In that famous paper, Bourdieu postulated that van Gennep had nothing to say about mechanisms of exclusion, and thereby intimated that his approach lacked a power dimension. While the latter may to some degree be sustained, it is worth underlining what van Gennep had himself written: 'The counterpart of initiation rites are the rites of banishment, expulsion and excommunication – essentially rites of separation and de-sanctification' (van Gennep 1960: 113). Those rites, says van Gennep, are essentially about the *setting apart* of objects or persons. Rites of passage can indeed create or recreate social divisions and inequalities, and it was very much implicit in van Gennep's framework, which contained an analytical openness towards rites of passage that Bourdieu's approach problematically narrowed down to 'social function' and institutional power.

Besides misrecognizing van Gennep's central arguments (which I seriously suspect Bourdieu never really read), in his own approach to rites, Bourdieu himself ends up on a rather deceptive mixture of Durkhemian functionalism and a Marxist-inspired reading of rites as mystification or 'naturalization' of power (Bourdieu 1992: 126). Rather than paying homage to Arnold van Gennep, engaging with his work from within, and taking seriously Victor Turner's elaboration, which by then had reached its mature stage, Bourdieu trashes van Gennep's fine-grained analytical framework into the dustbin of intellectual history, armed with Marx and Durkheim. He then reduces rites to the social structure they serve to maintain. It can be seen as a rather sad case of theoretical retrogression, returning to the Durkheimian premises that van Gennep himself had so carefully tried to move beyond.

But what was van Gennep's original critique of Durkheim all about? Let me state it in brief. In his 1906 book *Mythes et légendes*, van Gennep seriously questioned the adopted analytical procedure by which Durkheim positioned the Arunta (an Australian clan society) at a certain level or stage of

‘development’, creating an analytical shortcut to the question of ‘origins’. Whenever Durkheim recognized a change, over time, or between groups (in kinship affiliations, for example), he systematically prevented any real account of such a transformation, relegating it simply to the ‘general needs of society’ (van Gennep 1906: xxv). There was no grounding epistemology to tell us what such a ‘society’ *is* to be able to ‘have’ such needs. Durkheim operated a peculiar kind of ‘*métaphysique sociologique*’ (ibid.: xxiv), positing a metaphysical abstraction at the core of his argument, and then artificially ‘animating’ it. As van Gennep rather provocatively said, this is to resolve a problem *without having even managed to pose it as a problem* (ibid.: xxv).

However, in the context of this critique, he also raises the stakes. What is lurking behind Durkheim’s problematic collectivism is something even more problematic, and reaches far beyond Australian kinship classification:

We have seen how M. Durkheim explains social modifications by the ‘needs of society’ without indicating either the why or the where of those needs, and without justifying how exactly a ‘society’, however small, may have ‘needs’ in the first place. It is by an identical process of *animation* that they speak to us of ‘the call of the fatherland’, or ‘the voice of the race’. M. Durkheim anthropomorphizes, even if this is what he pretends to defend himself from. (van Gennep 1906: xxxv, emphasis in the original, my translation)

According to van Gennep, Durkheim’s sociology was not just flawed at the theoretical level; the entire epistemology upon which it built bore resemblances to and could serve to justify other and much more serious *political* essentialisms.

Van Gennep continued his critical engagement with Durkheim’s work, most conspicuously in his review of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2017). *Elementary Forms* is composed of two parts; one is general-theoretical, and the other is monographic. The latter, begins van Gennep, is the weaker part. He states quite bluntly that Durkheim demonstrates a complete lack of critical stance towards the sources, which were collected by traders, police agents and priests, and that he naively accepts their veracity. Durkheim overstates the theoretical potential of single facts, and interprets freely from dubious data. Durkheim also falsely attributes this ‘fictional’ procedure as the ‘German’ method.<sup>5</sup> The data and the whole procedure is thus simply unreliable:

In ten years, his entire systematization of the Australian material will have been utterly rejected, along with the multiple generalizations constructed on the flimsiest foundation of ethnographic facts I have ever observed. The idea he has extracted from this ensemble of primitive man and ‘simple’ societies is simply misguided. (van Gennep 2017: 577).

Here, of course, one could legitimately tender a defence of Durkheim: does his theoretical attempt not deserve to be taken seriously, irrespective of the flawed empirical material? Van Gennep agrees that Durkheim's general theories on religion deserve to be considered in their own right, as they are in fact full of 'solid truths' (ibid.). And yet, when Durkheim moves on to suggest his own theory (on the origins of totemic beliefs), no real theory is ever proposed. Durkheim proposes to see totemism as representing an anonymous and impersonal 'force'. This explains absolutely nothing. It also misrecognizes what van Gennep had specified as the essentially 'energetic' nature of religious conceptions (Mauss would again pick this up later).

Durkheim, says van Gennep, claims to have established the 'foundations of society' from a single religious institution (totemism), without realizing that this was just one very specific type of classification, peculiar to this not-so-simple society. The Australian Aborigines simply cannot be posited as a 'first' or 'elementary' building block upon which one can erect an entire edifice. The Aborigines (here again the Arunta) have complex matrimonial rules and totemic beliefs and practices; they cannot simply be taken to represent some kind of *Ursprung*.

In his insistence to throw in all stakes on the collective level, Durkheim categorically neglects the action of single, living individuals in the formation of institutions and beliefs: the very process and production that lies behind myth-telling and ritual acting is annulled.<sup>6</sup> Even in the most 'primitive' societies, van Gennep insists, individuals *do* act. Durkheim dreams of assigning society a natural reality, with its own laws of necessity, in a world devoid of concrete human beings. For the purposes of his theoretical construct, Durkheim artificially reduced Australian society to a 'mono-cellular organism', devoid of agency. Durkheim possesses only a metaphysic and scholastic understanding of the world; he constructs reality from preconceived words and concepts: 'Having no feel for life, no feel for biology or ethnography, he transforms living phenomena and beings (*vivants*) into scientifically desiccated plants arranged as in a herbarium' (van Gennep 2017: 578).

It is not simply that the data is wrong; it is not the flawed methodology; it is not even the circular, redundant theoretical style that is at issue: the problem, says Van Gennep, is that Durkheim lacks a *feel for life*.

## Van Gennep's Rhythmic Social Science

It is useful here to briefly introduce the kind of life science that van Gennep himself was trying to build up, standing in contrast to that of the Durkheimians. Van Gennep would call this a 'biological sociology', a perhaps somewhat unfortunate term. It should in fact be considered a kind of 'rhythmic social

science', which I have elsewhere argued bears similarities with the work of Gabriel Tarde (Thomassen 2012; see also Szakolczai and Thomassen 2011). To some extent van Gennep was indeed a child of French positivism. One central aspect of positivism has to do with the need for clearcut categories and classification. Van Gennep undeniably operates with divisions and categories. *Rites of Passage* is really all about categories and classifications. In his foreword, van Gennep starts by saying that it is high time to classify the vast number of rites that previous studies have discussed but never managed to present systematically; and this classification must be 'consistent with the progress of science' (van Gennep 1960: xxv). The opening chapter is entitled '*Classement de rites*'. Towards this aim, van Gennep introduces four basic oppositional distinctions, between sympathetic and contagious rites, direct and indirect rites, positive and negative rites, and animistic and dynamistic rites. Like a mathematician, he can then deduce that there are 'sixteen possible ways of classifying any single rite'.

Here again, however, we have to be careful. Van Gennep did not operate with categorization and classification in a spirit of naive positivism; and he fully understood that to analyse we must not only separate but also appreciate the larger whole. Van Gennep's understanding of social phenomena is complex, dynamic and energetic. It is, for example, true that van Gennep accepted the dichotomy between sacred and secular. This distinction was crucial for both Robertson Smith and Durkheim. However, unlike Durkheim, van Gennep does not understand the sacred as an absolute term. 'Sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations' (ibid.: 12). Sacrality in this very generic sense is both relational and mobile. It does not exist in fixed spaces or predefined moments. Sacrality depends on the activity performed, on the people observing this activity, and on the point or moment in time of the activity. People (and objects) are sacred or secular relative to their situation and relative to the where and when in their passage from one place or position to another.

The kind of movement that is so essential to van Gennep relates in my reading to the 'rhythms' that exist in the different orders of reality. He refused to radically separate the study of society from 'nature'. This is best captured by a careful understanding of the last sentence of van Gennep's famous book:

Finally, the series of human transitions has, among some peoples, been linked to the celestial passages, the revolutions of the planets, and the phases of the moon. It is indeed a cosmic conception that relates the stages of human existence to those of plant and animal life and, by a sort of pre-scientific divination, joins them to the great rhythms of the universe.<sup>7</sup>

Here again the contrast to Durkheim is categorical. For Durkheim, human beings bestow order on the universe via social classifications of their own making, a clearly neo-Kantian position that Durkheim, in the Introduction to *Elementary Forms* hubristically extends towards an empirical/social grounding of knowledge per se. To contrast, in *Rites of Passage* Van Gennep grounded the similarities in ceremonies in the very fact of transition: ‘The universe itself is governed by a periodicity [that] has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity’ (3). This rhymes perfectly with Tarde’s discussion of regularity and repetition. As stressed by Hochner (2018: 304), ‘the rhythms of the universe are rhythms that have social corollaries’.

In no way was van Gennep trying to reduce the social world to that of nature; there is no hint of sociobiology in any strict sense of that term. In van Gennep’s reading, scientists of the nineteenth century had become overtly distanced from reality. They had started to adopt a language that had lost directness in relation to the world that surrounds us, and of which we are a part. Van Gennep was therefore searching for a science that could allow us to return to *life*, just as Dilthey and Simmel were attempting at the same time in Germany. Van Gennep’s own approach was extremely methodical and concrete, and yet, always linked to a larger picture, in full awareness of the complexity and ‘relatedness’ of the single ‘items’ he singled out for discussion. Van Gennep passionately believed in science, but he was sceptical about certain usages of scientific positivism. The ‘biology’ or ‘biological sociology’ to which van Gennep referred was therefore not simply allusive to the authority and objectivity of natural science, rather indicative of the importance of *direct observation* and engagement with concrete lifeworlds. Van Gennep wanted social scientists to deal with *living facts*, rather than ‘dead’ and abstract facts. In fact, a more precise translation of van Gennep’s *faits naissants* might be ‘facts in their emergence’, or ‘things’ or ‘events’ in their moment of ‘coming into being’ – an almost Nietzschean understanding of ‘social facts’.

Van Gennep refused to see sociology, folklore and ethnography as radically separate disciplines. For him they were a single discipline with a shared methodology. It is within this horizon of genuine *life science* that the work of van Gennep belongs – as does the concept of liminality. A reappraisal of van Gennep’s thought can in crucial ways assist contemporary Tardean-inspired debates to rethink our epistemology. Van Gennep’s ultimate relevance is that his work needs to be revalorized as a stepping stone towards a genuine science of life or living experience, much in the spirit of the very last writing that Foucault published, the French version of his 1978 Introduction to Canguilhem’s *On the Normal and the Pathological*, entitled ‘Life: Experience and

Science' (Foucault 1998).<sup>8</sup> This relates to the question of limits, and allows us to end on a reflection on sacrality.

### **Boundaries, Limits, and the 'Pivoting of the Sacred': Recasting Secularization?**

In *Rites of Passage* van Gennep presents rites of passage in universalistic terms: 'Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence'; 'The life of an individual *in any society* is a series of passages from one age to another, and from one occupation to another' (van Gennep 1960: 3). The opening sentence of the book starts with 'Each larger society. . .' (*société générale*). Yet in the following paragraphs, van Gennep operates a broad distinction between 'modern' societies and 'less civilized' ones (we would of course use different terms today). What characterizes 'modern society' is that, since the Renaissance, the variety and strength of social divisions has been greatly reduced, so that the secular/sacred division remains as the only salient one, while in 'less civilized' societies one can note, says van Gennep, 'an ever-increasing domination of the secular by the sacred'. The secular/sacred divide does not disappear in the passage to modernity, quite the contrary: this divide, instead, gains higher significance compared to other societies where many types of passages between groups and between positions belong to the sacred realm. So, as the first sentence of the book continues, at 'lower levels of civilization . . . the differences among groups become accentuated and their autonomy increases'. The second sentence of the book continues: '[By] contrast, the only clearly marked social division remaining in modern society is that which distinguishes between the secular and the religious worlds – between the profane and the sacred'. The secular/sacred divide for van Gennep is not the same in various societies across time and space. Pressing the point, one could say that the secular/sacred divide as an absolute is peculiar to Western modernity, and cannot therefore be taken as a given.

My suggestion – that will surely need more substantiation – is that van Gennep potentially provides us with a different entry to the understanding of 'secularization' as a process. As seen via van Gennep, such a process is not primarily about what happens to 'belief' or a 'decline in religious practice' (it may of course also be that), but involves something much more fundamental, touching the basic question of limits and what happens to passage experiences across boundaries. From a van Gennep-inspired understanding, secularization can quite simply be defined as the de-sacralization of boundary-crossing. What is secularized is not – in the first instance at least – science or political rule; what is secularized is, at the deepest level,

the movement between positions in space or time that is ‘freed’ from social conventions or ritualization. This would imply that the very importance of such changes in people’s life is downgraded, devalued or simply dismissed. The examples of passage experiences and rites invoked by van Gennep himself are extremely illuminating in this regard: how to incorporate strangers; the loss of virginity; divorce experiences; movement between public and private spheres (crossing the threshold of the door of the household); the movement from villages into war zones; and the movement between village and market places (van Gennep 1960: 17–18).

The main quality of a boundary is its sanctity. That is why such limits need to be symbolized by members of a society, from the portals of a household to the landmarks between larger territorial units. The installation of such limit-symbols is always accompanied by rites of consecration (Gazit 2018). For van Gennep this is crucial. The sacrality of space rests upon a necessary recognition of boundaries, and the rites and taboos surrounding such boundaries. This also explains the crucial role played by what van Gennep calls ‘guardians of the threshold’ (*gardiens du seuil*), such as Hermes in Greek mythology, or Janus, the two-faced Roman god of warfare, who was also deity of doors and thresholds.

Scholars often refer back to van Gennep’s classification of pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal rites – this is his claim to fame, after all. Van Gennep recognized the transformative potential of rituals via the liminal. Liminality is indeed an irreplaceable term for the analysis of transition and social and political transformation (Szokolczai 2009; Thomassen 2013, 2014). Decisive events and formative ideas tend to take shape in figurations that are both spatially and temporally liminal.

However, it is crucial to remember that van Gennep distils this classification and introduces the notion of the liminal in the sections of a chapter on the territorial passage called ‘the sacred zones’ and ‘the sanctity of a passage’ (*Les divinités du passage*). It is also in this precise context that van Gennep introduces a corollary term, which is absolutely crucial if we want to understand the place of the liminal in the wider terminology he elaborated: the ‘pivoting of the sacred’. In his handwritten notes to his own manuscript, van Gennep wrote ‘bivalence’ in the margins of the text, but without erasing ‘pivotement’, as if to render more clear what he meant by ‘pivoting’. The pivoting, it seems, has to do with a double movement. Van Gennep writes that the ‘magic circles’ pivot. But this is more than simply a circular movement.

Although van Gennep never made such a discussion explicit, the kind of temporality that he captured here – his rhythmic framework – is indeed different from the temporality inherent to modernity: a temporality anchored in a narrative of revolution (as a radical break with the past) and evolution (as a continuous progress towards still higher forms). Van Gennep was scept-

tical about both. He did not endorse evolutionism, found little use in theories of 'origin', and was highly critical of the idea of revolution as an event that could suddenly replace what had existed previously, installing a new social order. Van Gennep's temporality is different; and it was a temporality that he recognized as given. Sure, everything moves, but the world is not a chaos. Change is constant but within a larger order of sequences. Change and stability are not categorical opposites but poles of the same ordered system, with its inbuilt rhythms of birth, death and regeneration (see again the excellent discussion by Hochner 2018). It is in this sense, I believe, that the 'pivoting' is also a 'bivalence'.

It might again be possible to relate this to a Nietzschean reading of social life, although more in the sense of a correction, replacing the dichotomy between 'order' and 'chaos' with a tripartite sequence containing both in a balancing act. Van Gennep rarely if ever made analytical leaps to purely philosophical debates, always arguing from the grounds of available data. However, the only philosopher van Gennep mentions in *Rites of Passage* is in fact Nietzsche, in the penultimate paragraph of the book. This is where van Gennep compares rectilinear to cyclical patterns, noting how the circular order from life to death and death to life (the sequential order of the book itself) acquired a 'psychological significance' in Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return (van Gennep 1960: 194).<sup>9</sup>

The double stress on the materiality of the limit and movement is vital to van Gennep's entire approach. Human life always takes place in-between the bounds of the 'given', the natural, cultural and social restricting conditions, and the unbound and unlimited freedom beyond the limit. For van Gennep this indeed is a universal condition: to know about the limits that surround personal and social existence. His theory does not essentialize the boundary; unlike Lévi-Strauss, he is not fixating the mind in a universal structure of rigid laws. Change is inherent to the structure. Movement is part of 'order' in his cosmic vision. In rites of passage, human beings touch the 'prohibited' land of unbound freedom and danger. The pivoting of the sacred emerges in the constant movement between the limit and the limitless, and the familiar and the foreign; social life, conceived as such, is a constant movement of sanctification, de-sanctification and re-sanctification of the boundaries that are necessary to render human and social life both possible and meaningful.

**Bjørn Thomassen** is Professor in Global Political Sociology at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University, Denmark. Research areas include global religion, urban studies, identity and memory politics, nationalism, liminality and social change, revolutions, and the so-

cial and cultural dimensions of globalization. He is the author of *Italy's Christian Democracy. The Catholic Encounter with Political Modernity* (Oxford UP, 2024, with R. Forlenza); *From Anthropology to Social Theory: Rethinking the Social Sciences* (Cambridge UP, 2019, with A. Szakolczai); and *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-between* (Routledge, 2016).

## NOTES

1. Parts of this chapter build on previously published articles (see in particular Thomassen 2012, 2016) and book chapters (see Thomassen 2014; Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019, Chapter 1).
2. This and the following section draw on Thomassen 2014, especially chapters 1–3; see also Thomassen 2016, and Szakolczai 2013.
3. Durkheim had himself hoped to be in charge of that important translation. In the spring of 1898, while Mauss was in London to study at the British School of Anthropology, Durkheim asked him to approach Frazer with this translation in mind – but it was too late, for the young van Gennep had already been offered the job (with A. Dirr). On 10 May 1898, Durkheim writes, seemingly rather annoyed, to Mauss: ‘My project to have *Totemism* translated has gone down the drain. . . . You can tell Frazer that my intention was to have it translated’ (Durkheim 1998: 136–37, our translation). Very likely this was the first time Durkheim ever stumbled upon the name of Arnold van Gennep (in the letter to Mauss he had referred to the ‘two translators’ of Frazer without mentioning their names).
4. This book was introduced and translated into English by Needham and published by Kegan & Paul in 1967 as *The Semi-Scholars* (van Gennep 1967). The book is a biting sarcastic description of the social sciences losing themselves in blindfolded specialization. After *Rites of Passage* in 1960 and *The Semi-Scholars* in 1967, no further works of van Gennep have been translated into English.
5. Durkheim had had a crucial stay in Germany in 1885–86, and liked to see himself as the transmitter of German empiricism and neo-Kantianism to the French universities.
6. In fact, the telling of myths is probably one of those activities that actually *requires* individual originality and impetus. Myths, like songs, poems and most art forms, simply cannot be produced by collectivities. They are *reproduced* by collectivities – but that is a completely different matter.
7. In his own copy he eventually capitalized this last word into ‘Universe’ (van Gennep 1981, addendum).
8. It thus resonates with the kind of anthropological ‘vitalism’ promoted by Rabinow (Rabinow 2008), using jointly Foucault and Canguilhem.
9. In his critical review of *Rites of Passage*, Mauss makes mention of this. He says that van Gennep sees rites of passage everywhere, and that he forces this ‘law’ of ritual passages into a principle that governs all religious representations, underpinning the very structure of thought and philosophy, ‘from the Greeks to Nietzsche’ (Mauss 1910). AvG did not use the term ‘laws’, insisting rather on ‘patterns’, so it is something that Mauss – possibly through Durkheim – forces upon his work. However, Mauss himself (together with his friend Hertz) read Nietzsche with attention.

## REFERENCES

- Belmont, Nicole. (1974) 1979. *Arnold van Gennep: The Creator of French Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. 'Rites comme actes d'insitution', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 43: 58–63.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1992. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Centlivres, Pierre, and Jacques Hainard (eds). 1986. *Les rites de passage aujourd'hui: Actes du colloque de Neuchâtel 1981*. Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1998. *Lettres à Marcel Mauss*, introduced and commented by P. Besnard and M. Fournier. Paris: PUF.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel Noah. 1995. *Power, Trust, and Meaning: Essays in Sociological Theory and Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1998. 'Life: Experience and Science', in James D. Faubian (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. New York: The New Press, pp. 465–78.
- Gazit, Orit. 2018. 'The Sociology of the Limit: Reformulating the Question of Migration through Van Gennep', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18(4): 266–82.
- Hochner, Nicole. 2018. 'On Social Rhythm: A Renewed Assessment of Van Gennep's Rites of Passage', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18(4): 299–312.
- Horvath, Agnes, Bjørn Thomassen and Harald Wydra (eds). 2015. *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Totemism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1910. 'Review of van Gennep's *Rites de Passage*', *L'Année Sociologique*, 11: 200–2.
- Rabinow, Paul. 2008. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Senn, H.A. 1974. 'Arnold van Gennep: Structuralist and Apologist for the Study of Folklore in France', *Folklore* 85(4): 229–43.
- Sibeud, Emmanuelle. 2004. 'Un Ethnographe face à la Colonisation: Arnold van Gennep en Algérie (1911–1912)', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10: 73–103.
- Szokolczai, Arpad. 2009. 'Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events', *International Political Anthropology* 2(1): 141–72.
- . 2013. 'Gennep, Arnold van', in R. John McGee and Richard L. Warms (eds), *Encyclopedia of Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Szokolczai, Arpad, and Bjørn Thomassen. 2011. 'Gabriel Tarde as Political Anthropologist', *International Political Anthropology* 4(1): 50–68.
- . 2019. *From Anthropology to Social Theory: Rethinking the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomassen, Bjørn. 2012. 'Emile Durkheim between Gabriel Tarde and Arnold van Gennep: Founding Moments of Sociology and Anthropology', *Social Anthropology* 20(3): 231–49.
- . 2013. 'Anthropology and Social Theory: Renewing Dialogue', *European Journal of Social Theory* 16(2): 188–207.
- . 2014. *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-between*. London: Ashgate Publishing.
- . 2016. 'The Hidden Battle that Shaped the History of Sociology: Arnold van Gennep contra Emile Durkheim', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 16(2): 173–95.

- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1904. *Tabou et totémisme à Madagascar: étude descriptive et théorique*. Paris: Leroux.
- . 1906. *Mythes et légendes d'Australie: études d'ethnographie et de sociologie*. Paris: E. Guilmoto.
- . 1910. *La Formation des Légendes*. Paris: E. Flammarion.
- . 1911. *Les Demi-Savants*. Paris: Mercure.
- . 1915. *Le génie de l'organisation: La formule française et anglaise opposée à la formule allemande*. Paris: Payot.
- . 1920. *L'Etat actuel du problème totémique*. Paris: Leroux.
- . 1922. *Traité Comparatif des Nationalités*. Paris: Payot.
- . (1909) 1960. *The Rites of Passage: A Classical Study of Cultural Celebrations*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- . 1967. *The Semi-Scholars*. London: Routledge.
- . 1981. *Les Rites de Passage*. Paris: Éditions A. et J. Picard [the addendum includes a transcription of Arnold van Gennep's handwritten corrections to the main text, intended for an updated edition of the original work].
- . 2017. 'Review of Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): 576–78.
- Van Gennep, Ketty. 1964. *Bibliographie des oeuvres d'Arnold Van Gennep*. Paris: Editions A. et J. Picard & Cie.
- Zerilli, Filippo M. 1998. 'Etnografia e etnologia al congresso di Arnold van Gennep. Neuchâtel, 1–5 giugno 1914', *La Ricerca Folklorica* 37: 143–52.