



Exzerpt: P. Smith: Codes and conflict. Toward a theory of war as ritual.

The article is about how to analyze events such as war with a cultural rather than the mostly utilized materialistic, economic, rationalist or psychological view. Counting on Durkheim's focus on ritual, symbolization and classification Smith develops his theory that even modern societies periodically need to recharge their »social and moral sentiments of solidarity by means of ritual activity founded [...] on the distinction between the sacred and the profane« (p. 106) as the ultimate binary codes. These rituals receive their character from »underlying and over-arching semiotic structures« (p. 107) that arrange concepts in patterns of binaries. He focuses on 'parole' (what is said, how is it said) and on ethnomethodological analyzing of accounts and accounting.

The Falklands war between Argentina and Britain serves him as an example. Neither materialistic/economic or geopolitical models provide good explanations for this war, it was too expensive and the geopolitical gains were too less. Smith argues that no public outcry in Britain was to be heard because of the semiotic structure of the discourse which was rooted in the deeper needs for an »festival of rationality, a celebration of modernity, a rite of democracy« (p. 113)

The discourse was structured around the underlying 'sacred:profane' binaries and deduced from them, for example 'democracy:dictatorship' or 'British people:Argentine people::free:unfree'. On page 117 is a list of his binary findings. These elements are on each side interlinked with each other and represent different aspects - to be a democracy means to be a moral, free, law-abiding and rational and thus the opposing side of the conflict has to be accounted on the opposing codes immorality, unfree, law-breaking and irrational. Smith verifies these opposing binary codes in different 'speech genres' like newspapers or parliamentary speeches.

The codes were not only cognitive structures to explain or legitimize the war but were furthermore a constitutive element. They transformed a mundane into a ritual event - towards an acceptable response to an unacceptable invasion - the war has to be recognized as being unavoidable. They also reaffirmed the value of the sacred side of the code while also dramatize the semiotic distinctions. »The key elements of 'reality' [...] were transformed by the encoding into symbols that embodied wider realms of meaning.« (p. 118) For the war being a successful ritual the sacred:profane structure of

the discourse has to be maintained.

In many iterations and examples Smith makes his argument clear: eg. in avoiding to be accounted as irrational the event has to be 'fair' so the assaults have to be 'clinical', the use of the proper naming as 'conflict' rather than 'war', the use of 'Task Force' rather than 'army'. Smith shows how the opposition of the war used the same codes and either used 'deflation', 'reclassification' or 'deconstrucion' techniques to lower the impact or rearrange meanings without touching the center of the grounding values in question and both sides try to influence typifications that make people of such an event.

Another important point is how he shows the transformation from 'old' propaganda which aimed at collective solidarity to value driven semiotic structures which are relatively autonomous from state manipulation in which a framework is provided in which ideas can play a constitutive role in the shaping of such conflicts. 'Modern' Propaganda cannot freely formulate typifications it has to »originate in, and appeal to, the preexisting discursive possibilities« (p. 128) in which the codes are set. All action have to be arranged around the 'sacred center' of the nation and have to be »consistent with commonsense understanding of what constituted reasonable action.« (p. 130)