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# What Good Are Elections?
## An Anthropological Analysis of American Elections

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Devised by anthropologists to look at non-Western societies, this paper uses anthropological ideas about rituals to analyze elections in United States culture, the self-professed exemplar for the world. The argument is that elections are a ritual structure deeply imbedded in the history and structure of the United States, and its place in the world-system. And, therefore, this is not a ritual practice that can be or should be considered necessarily appropriate for other places. In addition to its ethnographic and theoretical interests, then, the paper is a contribution to applied anthropology. Using data from the earliest years of the country's existence to the present, and focusing on presidential elections, it outlines four different but interrelated schemes that organize the practices. The first follows from the way a Nature/Culture contrast operates. The second employs standard ideas about rites of passage. An analysis of African joking relationships is used to delineate relationships internal to the rites of passage structure. The final model outlines how the entire ritual edifice accomplishes a temporary shift in United States consciousness into an image of mechanical solidarity. Through its ritual process, elections invert transformations effected by United States educational structures, which serve to produce organic differences.

**Keywords: United States, elections, ritual analysis, structuralism, ideology**

***To the Memory of Daniel De Coppet***

> The "thought-of" orders are those of myth and religion. The question may be raised whether, in our own society, political ideology does not belong to the same category.
>
> —Lévi-Strauss 1963[1953]:306

> When an exotic custom fascinates us in spite of . . . its apparent singularity, it is generally because it presents us with a distorted reflection of a familiar image, which we confusedly recognize as such without yet managing to identify it.
>
> —Lévi-Strauss 1966:238-239

## Introduction

This paper analyzes the shape and peculiar character of United States elections, paradigmatically presidential elections, using a complex of ritual models anthropologists have elaborated over the better part of the last century. This kind of ritual analysis, derived from the revival of Durkheim's French school between the 1950s and 1970s, and perhaps carried forward by Sahlins in the 1980s, was generated in a time when it seemed, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, that anthropology's role was to trade in amazement. "It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle. Australopithecenes, Tricksters, Clicks, Megaliths—we hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange. Merchant of astonishment" (Geertz 2000:64). This paper turns the fruits of that astonishment back onto the dominant culture of the present. Designed to instruct undergraduates in a course I have been teaching since the late 1970s, and presented in lecture format around the world since the early 1990s, I advance this paper now with the idea that others may add to the provisional insights it has generated to date. In a modest way, I hope this contribution will add to the work that others have recently put forth analyzing the central symbolic orders of contemporary states (Kapferer 1988; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993).[1]

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1 Here I wish to acknowledge two anonymous readers for the *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* and many friends and critics from Paris, Birmingham, Alabama, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Singapore and legions of undergraduates at the University of Virginia who have been writing reaction papers to a draft version of this document since the early 1990s. Among individuals I must single out for helpful criticism and suggestions are Louis Dumont, Christopher Taylor, Linus Digim'Rina, and Juan Ossio. Daniel De Coppet's untimely death in early 2002 prevented us from continuing two lines of inquiry he addressed to me back in 1991, although we discussed this analysis given the anomalies of the 2000 U.S. presidential election when we last met in 2001. One of these questions I repeat for the curious reader here: By voting, are citizens of the United States delegating responsibility or creating a community? This question, in addition to one I specify later about the place of Christianity in these collective rites, must be addressed by outsiders as well as, or perhaps instead of, insiders like myself, steeped in and committed to particular outcomes of the forms I outline here.

Michael Panoff (1988), among others, has recalled Lévi-Strauss's suggestion that politics in contemporary society looks like mythology in so-called traditional societies. It is not so much my point to illustrate Lévi-Strauss's comment and its important implications as it is to take what we have learned from looking at the myths and rituals of non-Western societies and apply them to the paradigmatic political rituals and ideology of the present. Born out of fears of ill-considered political actions taken by the United States in the 1980s,[2] the implications of the questions this paper poses are no less pertinent today, with the focus of attention shifted from Central America and Eastern Europe to the band of land running from the Mediterranean to the Khyber pass. Unquestionably the United States is the dominant world culture today, but should it be taken as an exemplar after which others necessarily model their own systems?

It is for others to answer this question from their own social perspective. The task set before me in this paper, and what I believe should be the first task of an anthropology of the present, is to examine United States practices using the analytical instruments of the anthropological observer.

Let me begin by saying exactly what this paper does not assert.

I am not suggesting either that U.S. elections should be dispensed with because they are useless, empty forms, or that they should be preserved intact because they are part of a (traditional) culture.

The United States has a long tradition of periodically discovering that it is bound by forms, by a culture which is often presented as "European." It finds these facts reprehensible. And then it tries to reposition itself once again in a Nature, representing the really real, a substance unfettered by empty or polluting forms.[3] Presumably this is part of the reason many in the country think others should be like us or want to be like us—we have invented the natural, and of course best, system. Although my title may suggest otherwise, the point to this paper is not that U.S. elections are rituals and therefore bad, and should, or could, be something else.

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[2] See *The Washington Post*, June 3, 1990, D5. The *Post*'s then African reporter Blaine Harden quotes a senior U.S. diplomat saying, "We funded the election, we organized it, we supervised the voting, and then when Doe, "the Liberian 'Big Man'" stole it, we didn't have the guts to tell him to get his ass out of the mansion." The progressive in me is inclined to write that only by not understanding the place of elections in our own society could we be so repeatedly misled, or misleading, and then disenchanted, by their enforced occurrence in another.

[3] There is now a great deal of creative historical work on this theme in American history and culture. Much of it I have learned from the works of David W. Noble (e.g., 1965, 1985, 2002), whose influence pervades this essay and to whom I give many thanks at this time.

At the same time, I do not wish to assert that because these elections are rituals they are sacred and cannot and should not be changed. Recently the attribution of "culture" to some custom, no matter how bizarre, stupid, or cruel, has led some to give that practice the aura of the sacred, placing it beyond criticism. This sentiment has its reasons when used to protect some group dominated, if not overwhelmed, by the juggernaut of modern society. Anthropologists, moreover, have no business attempting to modify the customs of other societies in which they do not bear the responsibility of having to live with the consequences of their actions. However, the unequivocal protection of custom is indefensible. Even if we do not know exactly how, we make our own culture, are responsible for it, and have to live with its consequences. This paper certainly contains a critical component, and if it unsettles, leads to recommendations for changes in electoral practices, or makes others question why they should follow these forms, so be it.

This essay in fact was born of dissatisfaction I experienced with the American electoral system in the early 1980s and my increasing sense that the system was not dealing with the critical issues of the state or world.[4] For a number of years I had been giving a lecture on U.S. elections in a class I teach on American culture. Mostly designed to teach students the rudiments of ritual analysis employing data they already knew experientially, the analysis was just supposed to be fun. But with a certain senatorial campaign I became fed up with the election process and decided to take the analysis more seriously. I wanted to sort out how and why these processes take the forms they do. Since they are pertinent to the content of U.S. elections as ritual, I should quickly summarize the immediate reasons for my distaste for that particular election.

In the 1982 Virginia senatorial campaign two experienced politicians became the Democratic and Republican candidates. One of them, Richard (Dick) Davis, my candidate and, as it turned out, the loser, had been a mayor of Hampton, an important eastern shore city in the state, when it had severe racial problems. He apparently had done an extremely good job mediating complex—and for Virginia and much of the United States, ongoing—race-related tensions. He had also become very wealthy as a mortgage banker.

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4 By the late 1980s the sentiment was widely shared. In January 1990, David Broder ("Five Ways to Put Some Sanity Back in Elections," *The Washington Post*, January 14, 1990, B1, 4), a political essayist for *The Washington Post*, began a periodic series of columns on what he calls "political sleaze control" (*The Washington Post*, May 20, 1990), to which he says the "journalism world has responded in unbelievable fashion." (See also Broder's "Americans Want Clean Campaigns," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 1990.) The distinguished television journalist John Chancellor weighed in with his own recorded misgivings about the current climate (Chancellor 1990).

Since by the early 1980s it was obvious that the U.S. savings and loan industry, and the complex place of housing in American culture,[5] were in crisis, it seemed that this candidate's experience with the mortgage industry would be very useful. During the course of the campaign, however, the man's considerable political, financial, and organizational background was never seriously discussed. His television, print, and handout literature instead stressed merely his stereotypical virtues in a U.S. politician, for example that he had been a paperboy in his youth and was a World War II veteran.

Such political rhetoric is hardly novel. But while my response as a citizen could be, and was, to bemoan it, my responsibility as an anthropologist became, and remains, to try to understand it. What are the forms that constrain or determine the content and significance of political debate in the world's leading democracy? Moreover, it seems to me that understanding this situation becomes all the more pressing as it becomes increasingly clear that the axis of national self-definition in the United States shifts from relations across the Atlantic to those west across the Pacific and south to the other Americas.[6]

As an anthropologist it became crucial that I ask several very elementary questions: What, really, are U.S. elections? What, why, and how do they do what they do for us or to us, or *fail* to do for or to us? And how do they compare to customs elsewhere in the world? This last question, of course, is the prerequisite for me, as an anthropologist, to be able to say something about contemporary practices that someone else might not be able to say. As an anthropologist I ought to have a different lever than other analysts. I know, or should know, that such affairs are more complex than immediate consciousness presents them to be. I know, or should know, that they also have a meaning that is different from, if also simpler than, the myriad of details that con-

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5 See Perin (1977). This is an important if poorly understood book, organized by anthropological ideas about exchange systems, whose very appearance probably symbolized the ensuing crisis. While the crisis has now passed, the savings and loan industry no longer exists, and the United States housing debt draws funds from the whole world.

6 Charlie Trie, a Chinese investor and capitalist who had lived in Little Rock and who had ties to an important Indonesian firm, returned to the U.S. on February 4, 1998, and was immediately taken to court and handed a warrant with regard to illegal campaign contributions during the 1996 presidential campaign. This was in fact a post-election issue and Kenneth Star was involved. On the issue of Chinese getting involved in various levels of the U.S. political system and the fears of outside corruption their engagements bring to the fore, see Ong (1992). See also *The New York Times*, Sunday October 18, 1998, A16, "Votes Are Lure as San Antonio Angles for GOP," an article that discusses how San Antonio is bidding for the 2000 GOP convention as the Republican party attempted to position itself to garner the increasingly significant Latin vote in the U.S. electorate. For an observant outsider's view—virtually anthropological in its totalizing scope—on the impending orientation of contemporary U.S. culture towards its southern neighbors see Flannery (2001).

stitute them. This point is important, given all of the journalistic material available on the U.S. system. Having read this material avidly now for more than twenty years, it is clear that some journalists have keen, if not anthropological, insight about how U.S. society works. Others are just good, or, all too often, bad, followers of story lines. But as an anthropologist I know, or should know, further, that the effervescence they create, or sometimes create, is not their meaning or their purpose, however dependent U.S. social cohesion is on at least a semblance of effervescence. Finally, I know that only by viewing them from afar, and in juxtaposition to things from which they are separated, will I be able to figure out what they are and how they function.

This latter point may be elaborated. Over the years as this paper has been developed and amplified, I have had the benefit of being able to juxtapose my understanding of the United States with the text of a lecture Sir Edmund Leach delivered around the United States in 1976 titled "Once a Knight is Quite Enough" (Leach 2000).[7] Ostensibly about his own knighting, it was in fact a brilliant analysis of the workings of the ritual system and ideology that instills legitimacy in the United Kingdom's social system. Clearly, for meritorious actions deemed to contribute to the fact of the realm, tokens of the state are placed on worthy individuals, the system thus instilling in its witnesses the fact and virtues of hierarchy.[8] The details of his analysis are not important here. (People familiar with Leach's decades of ritual analysis will not be surprised, but rather delighted.) Still, a comparative point attached to the essay's opening is worth quoting:

> . . . my lecture is in no way intend as a sideswipe at the British monarchy. Symbolic Heads of State play an important role in modern national and international relations and our British version of that frustrating office has much to be said in its favour as compared with the versions which we encounter elsewhere; the absolute distinction between symbol and reality which the British have achieved in the separation of hereditary Monarchy and elected Prime Minister has a great deal to be said in its favour as compared with, say, your own system of elected Presidents . . . . [ibid.:194]

Leach believed that the British system distinguished the symbolic, or the ideological, from the practical or pragmatic, whereas in the United States these two indispensable aspects of social life are bound up in the same form, at the highest level, in the President. I believe this is correct, and it points to peculiar features and constraints of the U.S. system.

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7 This essay remained unpublished until it appeared in Hugh-Jones and Laidlaw edition of Leach's collected writings (2000:194-209).

8 For the asymmetries of this symbolism see the discussion of "grace" in Hayden (1987).

I proceed now by sketching analytical paradigms I have found useful for outlining how I think the U.S. system operates. There are four of these, although I shall also hint at a fifth. These allow me to follow what I take to be a standard method in anthropology, the generation of insight by juxtaposition. And since insights are always relative, a certain cast of light on an object, and in this case an exceedingly complex object, there can be no pretension to completeness. One of my paradigms is, of course, van Gennep's analysis of *rites de passage*. I employ this model in one way only, but it is clear that the analysis I begin here could be much extended, especially concerning the symbolism of space, to eventually focus around Washington, D.C. as a sacred center. It could also be elaborated to show the fractal character of the U.S. electoral process as it exists across many spaces, as well as annual and generational time cycles. Thus this paper starts, rather than completes, an argument. Although I shall weave these paradigms together to some degree, I structure my paper by keeping them relatively separate and distinct. This should allow the reader to go off on his or her own to add experiences, and criticism, to the admittedly bare bones of this analysis.

A final introductory word about the data employed in this work: I am an insider of the culture I wish to describe here, with both the virtues and liabilities that perspective allows. I am also very much a participant observer, having been active in the U.S. electoral system since the 1970s, and an intensive anthropological observer of it since the early 1980s. The course out of which this paper flows has self-consciously adopted an historical perspective to the examination of U.S. culture because when the course was created in the 1970s I thought that a major problem for cultural analysis was the understanding of symbolic systems through time. At that time, significant runs of data were not available for the societies anthropologists traditionally examined, whereas they were for U.S. culture. Data for this paper, then, ranges freely across the epoch of the United States, from roughly 1790 to the present. In his essay on knighting Leach dated the antiquarian dress of the contemporary British state to roughly the early nineteenth century "when the ravages of the Industrial Revolution produced (by dialectical reaction) an enthusiasm for antiquarian revivalism of all kinds" (ibid.:200). Although more than the Industrial Revolution is involved, I do not believe it an accident of history that at roughly the same time the United States was carving out a national identity predicated on new spaces instead of old times. While I maintain that some of the patterns I reveal can be seen at the dawn of U.S. culture, without doubt their history has been one of continual change. Some components of my model seem to have emerged at particular times. The moiety-like nature of the two primary political parties probably first appeared only around 1830; if Washington, D.C. has

been the symbol of polluted and embedded hierarchy only since World War II, that is nevertheless a pattern of United States political rhetoric that can easily be dated to the Jacksonian, or even Jeffersonian periods of the U.S. presidential system. Without doubt, interesting and useful historical research remains to be conducted on these matters. Other data I draw on includes newspaper accounts extending now over a twenty-year period. Much of this material, for lack of space for full discussion, I must relegate to footnotes.

## Part I: Opposition, Nature, and Culture

I begin by employing one of anthropology's most deeply rooted techniques: an analysis of the degree to which relatively simple oppositions or contrasts structure some of the most basic, as well as the most abstract and high-level, cosmological principles of a culture. Starting with a recounting of an order of the facts, I next offer several interpretive schemes by which the facts may be pursued in greater detail, and end by noting some of the consequences of the U.S. system.

It seems to me an important fact that so many U.S. presidents are presented as bastards—products of illegitimate unions—or as adopted children. All are in one way or another seen or see themselves as coming from, or as marked by, Nature rather than Culture.

George Bancroft, probably the United States' first great historian, and, like many significant American historians, heavily engaged in political administrations (from Lincoln and Johnson on), told us that George Washington was an "orphan." Discussing the virtues that made George Washington appropriate as commander-in-chief for the Revolutionary Army, Bancroft writes that Washington's

> robust constitution had been tried and invigorated by his early life in the wilderness. . . . At eleven years old left an orphan to the care of an excellent but unlettered mother, he grew up without learning. Of arithmetic and geometry he acquired just enough to be able to practice measuring land; but all his instruction at school taught him not so much as the orthography or rules of grammar of his own tongue. His culture was altogether his own work, and he was in the strictest sense a self-made man; yet from his early life he never seemed uneducated. At sixteen he went into the wilderness as a surveyor, and for three years continued the pursuit, where the forests trained him, in meditative solitude, to freedom and largeness of mind; and nature revealed to him her obedience to serene and silent laws. [Bancroft 1858:393-394]

Culturally, Bancroft presents Washington as a product of Nature (see Noble 1965: Chapter 2).

In his *The Protestant Establishment*, E. Digby Baltzell, one of the truly great U.S. sociologists and historians of the twentieth century, stressed that Abraham Lincoln was the product of a mother who was illegitimate.[9] President Gerald Ford's organization subtly introduced into his 1976 campaign that he, Ford, had been an adopted child. If Jimmy Carter's advertisements for the same election could be believed, he came from "Georgia dirt." Ronald Reagan, of course, came riding out of the sunset, and it was to his ranch, horse, and woodpile that he regularly retreated while president. Reagan's whole political existence has been an incredible incarnation of the naivete widely associated with American culture. That his juvenile ignorance and grandfatherly [10] demeanor got combined during his presidency ought, surely, to be one of the historical mysteries of the late twentieth century, one that remains to be fully described and explained. George Bush faced difficulties presenting himself as a product of Nature rather than Culture, but, arguably, his Maine vacations, Texas hunting trips, and lack of Eastern eloquence somewhat offset his upper-class background. Being from Arkansas helped Bill Clinton significantly, but perhaps not as much as having a father who died before he was born and, compared to Bush, being young and unsullied by the forces of Washington politics. And it was hardly remarkable that one of Albert Gore's significant biographical details was that he spent his youth shoveling horse manure from his father's barn in Tennessee.

In this symbolic system Nature, presented as one's scene or background, subtly, or not so subtly, becomes a causal determinant of the candidate's virtues.[11] There are and have been many other direct and indirect, successful and unsuccessful, attempts to draw on this symbolism: John Glen tried to come into the political limelight from the "final frontier" of space travel; Gary Hart from the Colorado mountains. Jesse Jackson borrowed from this rhetoric during the 1988 campaign, but he carried too much weight from other collective

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9 "At the time of the Declaration of Independence, there was a captain of the Virginia militia living in Rockingham County named Abraham Lincoln . . . . On the advice of his close friend Daniel Boone, Abraham Lincoln sold his farm in Virginia in 1782 and took his wife and five children out to the Kentucky frontier, where several years later he was killed by Indians. His son, Thomas Lincoln, was an unsuccessful and wandering farmer, casual laborer, and wheelwright who in his mature life was barely able to write his name. In 1806 he married Nancy Hanks, the natural child of Lucy Hanks but of unknown paternity. Whatever her natural endowments, Nancy Hanks was 'absolutely illiterate' and throughout life associated with 'lowly people.' On a farm of stubborn ground and in a crude cabin of logs cut from nearby timber . . . in 1809, Nancy bore Thomas Lincoln a son whom they named Abraham after his grandfather . . ." (Baltzell 1966:4).

10 This quality in U.S. leaders was addressed years ago in Ruesch and Bateson (1951).

11 On this matter of scene being transformed into causal agent I draw on the work of Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad (1969).

representations for this tactic to be convincing politically. Michael Dukakis employed the form, too, during his 1988 run as the Democratic presidential candidate. Trying to transcend his cold-hearted, pragmatic, bureaucratic image—one that he projected and was projected on him—he played the rhetoric for what it was worth, stressing his ethnic origins and his Greek heritage. In other times this would have disqualified him because it associated him with Europe, precisely the place to which Americans usually see themselves as morally opposed. But some European identities, especially recently, have been re-presented as being blood-based rather than time- and culture-based, so Dukakis's tactic was viable.

All these referents draw on American culture's frontier cosmology, the belief that the United States is different. This is sometimes referred to as "American Exceptionalism"(see note 2), an old version of which underlies the current Bush Administration's approach to the rest of the world. It is based on the notion that the country was created by Nature, rather than temporal orders of human devising. Although one might wish to stress that the point of this identity is that the candidate, once identified with or as Nature, must come into Culture, I shall deal with that order of fact under a different paradigm.[12] Instead I wish to stress that what is being specified in this Nature symbolism is a *kind of person* on the one hand, and a *national identity* on the other. And to the extent this analysis can be extended into its related cultural orders, the discussion should go in two directions, at least. The first draws on work on the structure of "kinship" in United States culture, especially that of David Schneider (1970, 1980[1968]).[13] The second may be illustrated by suggesting how the United States forged its identity by opposing itself to the forms of other political units. The ultimate extension of this analysis concerns the creation of national identities in the modern world system more or less existent in the West since the sixteenth century.[14]

Here, however, I need be brief.

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12 Sahlins's discussion (1985) of "stranger-kings" might be usefully employed in the contexts of these social facts, thus the unelaborated fifth paradigm noted in my Introduction.

13 See also Barnett and Silverman (1979), who significantly extend Schneider's analysis.

14 My main reference here remains the work of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989). In his third volume Wallerstein sees the revolutionary period of the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resulting in the loss of political content to national representations: "The new nationalism was 'almost entirely devoid of social content'..." (1989:256). I believe his analysis, and my own here, could be extended since the political forms I am talking about seem to have come to the fore in American culture in the late 1820s and 1830s, especially with Jackson's elections. It is in this context that Leach's locating the antiquarian emphasis in British state ritual should be re-examined: what is at issue is the re-articulation of units and the organization of techniques of political legitimacy attendant to an intensification of accumulating capital in a transforming world system.

Schneider demonstrates that running through many aspects of United States culture is a contrast between the order of nature, or blood, and the order of law, or culture. In the domain of practices most U.S. citizens recognize and refer to as "kinship," the central contrast is between blood relatives and "in-laws." Relationships between people based on blood are understood as relationships based on something internal to the person, and therefore beyond self-interested action. Such relationships are presented as being incapable of being feigned or dissolved. Relationships "in-law" are consciously made, and may be consciously unmade. People choose to marry one another and many choose to divorce one another, just as they may choose, or be chosen, to work (or not) in a certain relationship. Relationships between in-laws are external to them, and hence necessarily witnessed by the State, and usually a church, to attempt to add legitimacy to them. But both of these institutions are seen, in United States culture, as products of largely human devising, for all intents and purposes artificial.

The two kinds of relationships, in nature and in law, logically generate four kinds of persons. There are those related by blood alone: "natural," "love," or "illegitimate" children. Law relates others: spouses, legally adopted children, and "in-laws." Blood and law relate one set of persons: children born of legally married parents. Finally there are, I believe, people created only in culture, a category of person so far only realized in our science fiction and fantasy life by such moral monsters as Frankenstein, and his modern, cold-hearted, and often robotic re-incarnations (e.g., the Terminator).

Although illegitimate children carry a stigma, the political rhetoric that locates candidates, and especially presidential candidates, in Nature draws on the first of these four kinds of relations. It attempts to show that the candidate is a pure, essential being, equating him with what is thought to be the essence of America, its identity with Nature. The otherness of the other candidate is often portrayed as a permutation of the relationships in-law, relations in or by culture only. These involve variable combinations of self-aggrandizing individuals, the pollution of hierarchy, or simply cold-hearted persons with little depth of feeling. For the 1988 presidential election the "brilliant" Bush campaign succeeded in making Dukakis look like a cold-hearted bureaucrat by tying him to the "Willie Horton" case. William Horton, Jr., a black American, convicted of murder and jailed in 1974, had by the 1980s become eligible for a furlough program the state of Massachusetts had been using to try to return convicts to society. Dukakis was the governor. Horton was released from prison for forty-eight hours, but rather than returning, had escaped to the state of Maryland where he stabbed a white man and raped a white woman.

Bush's campaign used the issue to destroy Dukakis's candidacy.[15] Next to Bush's son, in the 2000 campaign, Albert Gore's overbearing sincerity created the same sort of unfeeling imagery and the sense that he was not genuine among a significant portion of the U.S. electorate.

The point here, of course, is that our political forms assume the proportions of "moral monsters," a term that comes from T. O. Beidelman, and in one sense the paradigm for this phenomenon is located in the structures of the most intimate relations Americans imagine, kinship relations, and the kinds of qualities of persons that seem to matter most.

The essentialism and apparent uniqueness of the symbolic dress, the *masquerade*, of our main political actors is not just tied to the kinds of persons represented in the structure of our kinship relations.[16] The symbolism also, often consciously, distinguishes the political form of America from those of other nations. The main contrast to the American candidate as arising from nature is England's political-symbolic center, the English monarchy and class system.[17] As noted above in the quote from Leach, that system dresses itself up

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15 From a symbolic—and political!—point of view, the "Willie Horton" case was perhaps *the* captivating event of the 1988 presidential election. There is now a considerable literature on the topic (for web-based discussion, see http://www.pressroom.com/~afrimale/jamieson.htm and http://slate.msn.com/id/1003919/). More importantly, these ritual formats, the enactment of attitudes and ideas, have consequences. For some years I had been on my department's graduate admissions committee in which capacity I frequently interviewed prospective Ph.D. anthropology candidates. Shortly after the 1988 election one young woman came to my office to discuss our program. She had already spent a number of years working in various aspects of the U.S. penal system. She indicated that practically everyone engaged in the system realized that something drastic needed to be done, that filling up prisons with more and more people was not the solution to the problem. But while solutions to the problem were not clear, the debate over them was vigorous and far transcended common political affiliations. However, she said Bush's use of the Willie Horton case and its political effects ended the discussion. Yet others have continued. Bush's loss to Clinton in 1992 brought about an alliance between those people who generated the Horton advertisement and those, mostly right-wing segregationists from Arkansas who were swept aside by the changes Bill Clinton's generation effected in that decidedly archaic, by late twentieth-century standards, state. Some of this history and its collusions are described in Conason and Lyons (2000). See especially Chapter 5, "'Justice Jim' Rides Again."

16 These dynamics become evident in some of the more surprising—or not so surprising—places. See Zuckerman (1998:98-127), for how they work on class relations in England in a fashion that is a precursor to many late twentieth-century food dynamics: simplicity cuts hierarchy, all the more facilitating accumulation processes. The aforementioned Noble book (1965) illustrates how such a thesis—a simplicity derived from Nature cutting (European) hierarchical Culture—becomes fundamental to the writing of U.S. history from Bancroft in the 1930s up to at least the 1960s. Noble refers to these patterns as "historical dramas," and the realization of his book is that they are not just errant history: they are U.S. cosmology. They should be compared with Victor Turner's "social dramas" (Turner 1957), and Wallace's discovery, upon writing his "history" of Rockdale, that there was a plot to the actions he discovered (Wallace 1978:xvi).

17 Hayden (1987) gives a useful account of the symbolism of British royalty and its place in

in (hereditary) time, and increasingly since the 1830s, has presented itself as if it remained lodged in times long past. As early as 1796—given that this is the immediate aftermath of the Revolutionary War the point is hardly surprising—anti-British rhetoric found play in U.S. elections. In the election that year between Adams and Jefferson "Republicans called Adams 'an avowed friend of monarchy' who plotted to make his sons 'Seigneurs or Lords of this country'" (Boller 1984:8).[18] But countries and political forms in addition to England's have served a similar contrastive purpose. The 1840 contest between Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison proves an apt illustration. The Whigs had to first democratize Harrison, turning him from "a well-born, college educated" but ineffective general into a man of the people born in a log cabin. "But," in Boller's words:

> . . . the Whigs did more than democratize Harrison; they aristocratized Van Buren. Before they got through, they had turned the President (Van Buren), a dignified and polished but sincerely democratic gentleman, into the effetest of snobs. . . . In a speech in Congress in April lasting *three days* [Congressman Charles Ogle of Pennsylvania] lashed out against Van Buren for maintaining a "Royal Establishment" at the nation's expense "as splendid as that of the Caesars, and as richly adorned as the proudest Asiatic mansion . . . ." The picture of Van Buren as a haughty and somewhat effeminate aristocrat . . . was indelibly imprinted in the minds of thousands of Americans during the 1840 contest. Coupled with the charge that his policies had produced "hard times"—the Panic of 1837 and the severe depression that followed it—and that he lived in luxury while the masses suffered, the Whigs established the image of a selfish and unfeeling Chief Executive that the Democrats were never able to correct. [1984:68-69; my italics][19]

Ogle's three-day speech suggests that the causes of current unease about how the elections work are not the technology and economics of our various media, which has produced the ubiquitous thirty-second sound bite. Nor is the "recent" objectification and commodification of our political candidates

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English society. The grace English royalty gives (back) to the English working class has fascinating affinities with the place of first religion, then education, in American society from the 1820s on.

18 Depending on how history treats his term, George W. Bush will be very vulnerable to charges of polluting hereditary influences since it is easy to sustain the charge that his father's cohort fixed the election. See Garry Wills review of several campaign books in the Sunday, April 1, 2001, *New York Times Book Review*, 8-9.

19 Asia seems to have played a significant role in this time period. In his stimulating discussion of "literalism in America" Vincent Crapanzano writes the following, from the early 1830s: "The confining of a people, who have arrived at a highly improved state of society, to the forms and principles of a government, which originated in a simple if not barbarous state of men and manners, Nathaniel Chipman wrote in *Principles of Government* in 1833, was like Chinese foot-binding, a 'perversion of nature' which would lead inevitably to social upheaval" Crapanzano (2000:222).

new(s). For the 1896 campaign, Theodore Roosevelt complained that Mark Hanna "advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine" (Boller 1984: 172, footnote omitted).

Ideas structuring the U.S. system thus clearly have more consequences than do its means—contemporary media technology.

Drawing on the United States' understanding of its place in Nature, candidates attempt to make themselves authentic representations of what is understood to be authentically American, that is, persons, usually from Europe, leveled by their encounter with the American Nature. And in asserting this message, either directly or indirectly, candidates oppose themselves to their opponents, who are implicated, directly or indirectly, in a hierarchy usually of European cast.

There are two immediate consequences to these forms of political rhetoric. One is that our politicians cannot seriously debate policies having to do with hierarchy. In certain political climates—the 1960s was one—such issues can be addressed if designed to rid the body politic of hierarchy. Other than that, debate about what society is, or should be, is highly restricted—George Bush's assertions in the 1988 campaign that America has no class system provide an illustration of this phenomenon. Just as apt were George W. Bush's efforts in 2000 to criticize Albert Gore any time the latter seemed to raise the issue of class.

Another immediate consequence of this set of contrastive representations is that relative ignorance, real or feigned, is almost never a liability. This is because such ignorance is opposed to what I mean by "Culture," and being so opposed to culture is usually a virtue. For example, not a few people asserted throughout Reagan's presidential campaigns and administrations that he did not have the intelligence or intellectual background for the job he sought and held. But such accusations probably did more to sustain and buttress Reagan's symbolic hold—he never had any other—on the American imagination. One can hardly commend George W. Bush for using this tactic in the 2000 debates against Gore, for he lost the popular election. Yet it was clear that the pose he struck was designed to show that Gore was, in American parlance, just a "know-it-all," and as a strategy it succeeded. The charge against Reagan, repeated against Bush in 2000, is, more or less, common in our electoral history. For the 1828 election, "When an Adams pamphlet pointed out that Jackson was uneducated and couldn't spell more than one word in four, the Jacksonians retorted that Jackson's natural wisdom and common sense were superior to Adams's book learning and that, fortunately, there were 'no Greek quotations' and 'no toilsome or painful struggles after eloquence' in him

as in the 'learned man' in the White House."[20] Again, Boller's depiction of the Harrison (Whig) and Van Buren (Democrat) election illustrates the same conditions for the 1840s:

> Fumed the Democrats, "In what grave and important discussion are the Whig journals engaged? . . . We speak of the divorce of bank and state; and Whigs reply with a dissertation on the merits of hard cider. We defend the policy of the Administration; and the Whigs answer 'log cabin,' 'big canoes,' 'go it Tip, come it Ty!' We urge the re-election of Van Buren because of his honesty, sagacity, statesmanship . . . and the Whigs answer that Harrison is a poor man and lives in a log cabin." [1984:68][21]

Regarding the 1988 election, it may be suggested that in fact Bush's poor choice of words and relative inarticulateness was his saving grace, for it helped mask the upper class, crafty, Ivy League background he and his major spokesmen otherwise exuded, espoused, and exhibited.[22]

We shall return to another dimension of these relationships presently.

## Part II: Elections as Rituals

However much it may be that the U.S. electoral system draws on contrastive collective representations—both within the United States and between it and other units in the world system—for its coherence, it is also clear that U.S. elections are very large and complex rituals. I use two models anthropologists employ for understanding rituals to depict the internal relations apparently inherent in the electoral process. The first is known by the name "rites of passage." The second by the phrase "joking relations." Anthropologists constantly write about rites of passage. They used to write about joking relationships, seemingly bizarre customs found in much of Africa and the South Pacific. Tables 1 and 2, outline some of their essentials.

### *Elections as Rites of Passage*[23]

Elections are installation rites. They move a candidate from being more or less one of the people to a person with the different, if not peculiar, status of government, with very different public responsibilities and obligations. It

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20 Boller quotes Rzwenc and Bender (1978[vol. 1]:400).

21 Boller is quoting from McMaster (1915[vol. 6]:584).

22 On Bush's Ivy League background see C. Vann Woodward's comments on the 1988 election (Vann Woodward et al. 1988).

23 This analysis draws on and presumes the classic literature on such rites including van Gennep (1960), Leach (1961), Beidelman (1966a), and Turner (1967).

must be pointed out that both poles in this contrast, "people," and representative of the government, are organized categories presupposing well-formed, routinized perspectives. If members of U.S. society think the first is part of nature, the second is presumed to be artificial. In so relocating candidates, elections exhibit the classic forms of rites of passage.

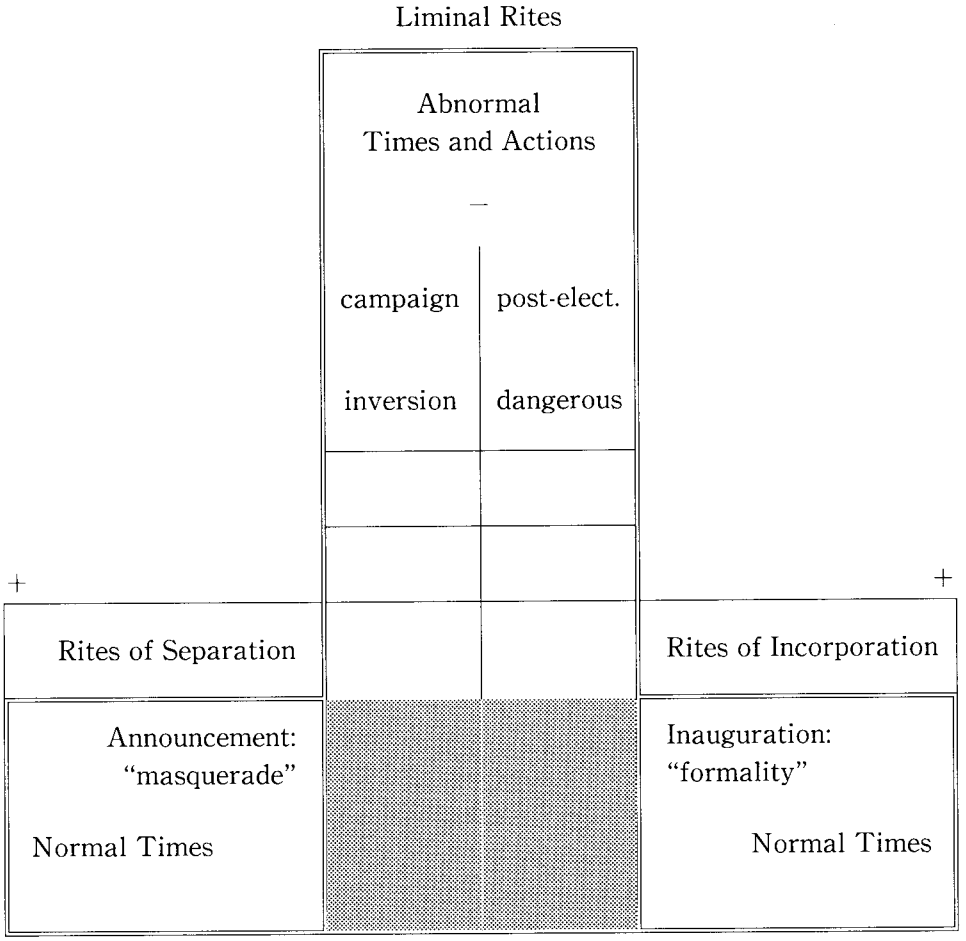
Ever since van Gennep's original formulation (1909[1960]), it has been recognized that most rituals go through three recognizably different stages. Some kind of *rite of separation* sets the period off from non-ritual times, putting the relevant population into *marginal* or *liminal* time. Some kind of *rite of incorporation* returns the population from the liminal period to more or less normal time. Often the classic Durkheimian distinction between "profane" and "sacred" is useful for describing the differences between "normal" times and the central, liminal period of the ritual. For years anthropologists have described in great detail, and been fascinated by, the myriad of *inversions* that usually characterize differences between the profane and the sacred times in rituals throughout the world. Real or perceived *danger* also frequently characterizes orientations within these liminal periods. I shall note some examples below.

Along with the inversions that characterize the relationship between profane and sacred times, Leach proposed specific logical relationships between the structures of rites of separation and the closing incorporation rites. According to him, rites of separation are often characterized by masquerade whereas incorporation rites frequently exhibit significant *formality*. By masquerade I mean the assumption of an identity that hides another identity. By formality I mean the assumption of an identity that embellishes, accents, or otherwise emphasizes only one, hierarchical in this case, feature of an actor's existence.

Implicitly or explicitly, all ritual sequences for which van Gennep's model are relevant end up making statements about a culture's organization of time. Therefore a quick note on the overt sequencing of U.S. elections will be useful. Election cycles run according to national, state, and various local calculations, with states and their various localities—e.g., county, parish, town, city —having considerable latitude to define their periodicities any way they see fit. Among other things, local elections are steps on a ladder for the ambitious to higher, that is, state and national, office. Therefore serious political activists are constantly working on campaigns that may be deemed significant. National elections for presidents, senators, and members of the House of Representatives, for example, are regularly scheduled for the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even years (1990, 1992, 1994, 1996). Presidents must be elected or re-elected every four years (1996, 2000, 2004); senators every

six years (a third of the Senate standing for election every even year), and representatives every two. Some states and localities orient their cycles to these, but some purposely offset them, ostensibly to force people to vote on issues and persons rather than along party lines.[24] In the state of Virginia, for example, the office of Governor, as a four-year term, is selected on odd years (1989, 1993, 1997, 2001), offset to the national election.

**TABLE 1.** U.S. elections as rites of passage.




[24] After becoming used to, and worn out by, the cycles in the state where I have resided since 1976, I complained to an experienced local political reporter. He replied that the state's political elders, around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, designed it that way so that most people would get tired of the process and stop paying much attention to it.

Schools mimic these patterns so that fractal versions of these forms run every year in elementary schools, middle/junior high schools, high schools, and colleges and universities throughout the land. Although these school elections take on the character of play-acting, they inculcate basic ritual forms in a new generation. And, as we shall see, elections embedded in the educational system foreshadow one of the more important transformations this order effects. In this regard it is important to realize that the U.S. school system is, among other things, a device for ranking citizens, and the further along the educational system one attends the more obvious the ranking embedded in the system.

Although political parties used to be the primary forum for selecting who would represent the party as its candidate, with party conventions major political events held during the summer before the election, the course of the twentieth century saw the evolution of state caucuses, meetings of political parties within each state, and state primary elections, which have become more important than the political conventions. Potential candidates must make important decisions long before they declare their intentions, yet presidential candidates tend to announce for office about a year before the major caucuses and primary elections begin. The caucuses and primaries begin in January and February of the year of the election, the following November, so it is during the preceding odd years that formal candidacy announcements tend to be made. It is probably consistent with the order described in the previous section that for much of the last 100 years the Iowa Caucus and especially the New Hampshire Primary have been the first, and most important, initial tests for would-be candidates. These are two small and mostly rural states, to some considerable degree reflecting "rustic" dimensions of the American experience. Parties still hold their formal conventions, in July or August once the primaries are over, in a major city of some major state. As noted earlier, presidential and many other elections are held on the Tuesday following the first Monday of November. The presidential inauguration is held on the following January 20 in Washington, D.C. The spatial movement across this time cycle works to some extent from the fringe to the center, and certainly from the rustic and real to the ceremonial.

In the perspective I adopt it is convenient to view a candidate's announcement to run for an office as the rite of separation. This is the moment when the person changes his formal status from normal citizen to candidate for office, and, of course depending upon how well he—or increasingly she—is known, is observed in a new way. Contemporary U.S. culture understands the special focus on the candidate as the necessary process of judging his or her character. And the character that candidates strive to assume is that of a

"virtuous person," that is, a person who is apparently unconnected and unbeholden to anyone: He, or she, appears as pure principle.[25]

This assumption of a mantle of virtuousness is what I mean by the masquerade of the initial rite of separation.

The Nature/Culture distinction discussed earlier usually becomes operative at this point. In their announcement for office, candidates, especially presidential ones, often depict themselves as coming from the essentialism of American nature, and not beholden to the artificial entanglements of previous alliances or the hierarchies of culture. This is one reason many politicians "run against Washington." "Washington" is now the major symbol of embedded hierarchy and complexity in American life—New York and its high culture and banks previously occupied this role—and either by focusing on it, or on one's own derivation from a place far distant, say, the Colorado Rockies as in Gary Hart's announcement, one may present one's self as pure and uncorrupted.[26]

The masquerade of the initial announcement, the rite of separation, contrasts sharply with the formalities presented at the conclusion of the ritual period, the inauguration. The inauguration is a rite of incorporation. In contrast to the initial rite of separation that stressed the candidate's purity and his unalloyed stance in natural principle, the inauguration presents the candidate in the glory of his old and new connections. President Jimmy Carter knowingly or unknowingly modeled his inauguration on Andrew Jackson's first inauguration, inviting common people to Washington from all points along his personalized and individualized campaign trail. Ronald Reagan was famous for bringing the conspicuous wealth of the Republican party to Washington, as well as "the Frank Sinatra contingent." Covering Reagan's two inaugurations, *The Washington Post* was filled with articles about the numbers of privately owned aircraft that flew into Washington for the formalities.

Members of both parties formally view the initiation. So does the neutral State through the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who, in his office and by

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25 For the campaign of Sharon Pratt Dixon, mayor of Washington, D.C. from 1991 to 1995, *The Washington Post* printed editorials proclaiming her virtues based on the fact that she was supposedly unconnected to any group of special interests and could, therefore, act as an autonomous person, to throw out all the rascals. Ross Perot's candidacy in the early months of 1992 intensified this rhetoric to the point, it would seem, of near collapse.

26 The contradictions inherent in this aspect of American life are now well described, and reverberate throughout the culture, not just in its rituals. The contradiction is the massive and formal social dependency amidst various proclamations of self-sufficiency and perfected autonomy. *The Washington Post* correspondent Blaine Harden is one of the more trenchant observers of the scene, especially in his powerful but disturbing description of the fate of the Columbia River (Harden 1996).

holding the Bible, represents connections and responsibilities beyond those contested during the election.[27] The newly installed office holder makes appearances at all the inaugural balls. All these connections are underscored by participants wearing the most formal attire our public dress fashions allow. If the electoral process tends to begin at the "Nature" side of our collective life, it ends squarely by the side of "Culture."

The opposition between the masquerade of the announcement and the formality of the inauguration is part of a complex play of time arguably at the center of U.S. culture. The United States maintains a complex relationship to time in the course of this ritual sequence-moving out of it in the beginning, and back into something that stresses it with the inauguration. So the initial masquerade of virtue and unconnectedness, with its celebration of Small Town America-Plains, Georgia, for Carter, Reagan's ranch in California, coastal Maine for the first Bush, Hope, Arkansas, for Clinton, and the Texas ranch for the second Bush—is brought to completion in the pomp and display of connections in the elaborately "civilized" ceremony (and maintained more or less throughout the term of office). Some of this sway has to do with the original defining context of the American system. The United States sought to create a chief of state not defined by a hereditary system, yet it created a king-like entity, a symbol that transcends the personal. Whatever like contradictions many European societies still entail, they are mediated by the fact that their king or monarch no longer rules, but merely endures, while the prime minister rules. They have sorted out their permanent and transitory leaderships into two roles. The United States has bound them in one.

In between the initial announcement of candidacy and the inauguration

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[27] European acquaintances, often taken aback by the prominent place of religion in contemporary American public life, see this detail as the sacred formally coming into and legitimizing the American officeholder, and they presume that church and state are conjoined, the one legitimizing the other. There is room for counter interpretation, as well as historical and ethnographic research, here. However, I suggest the use of the bible is that of an order standing outside of, not necessarily above, and encompassing in a Dumontian sense, the political fray that has just ended, an imagined position in keeping with the supposedly independent and apolitical judiciary. Support for my interpretation easily derives from the statements Gore and Bush both made on December 13, 2000, following the most perturbing election in recent U.S. history. Gore: "While we yet hold and do not yield our opposing beliefs, there is a higher duty than the one we owe to political party. This is America and we put country before party. We will stand together behind our new president . . . . Thank you and good night, and God bless America." Bush: "I was not elected to serve one party, but to serve one nation. The president of the United States is the president of every single American, of every race and every background. Whether you voted for me or not, I will do my best to serve your interests and I will work to earn your respect . . . . Thank you very much and God bless America." © 2000 The Washington Post Company. I am well aware that anyone observing the inauguration of George W. Bush on January 20, 2001, might wish to come to a different conclusion.

lies a long liminal period. The contradiction between the initial stance of the candidate as a pure, virtuous individual and his eventual representation as well and powerfully connected gives to this liminal period an air of unreality.[28] The aforementioned "Willie Horton" case exemplifies this problem: Rather than directly address overwhelming strains in the society or the criminal justice system, much rhetoric during the Bush/Dukakis contest turned on fantasies generated by White/Black issues in the contemporary body politic. This dimension can be underlined by the fate of the one recent presidential candidate who tried to be real(istic): Walter Mondale, who in his 1984 election bid accurately stated that the government needed to raise taxes and said that if elected he would do so, lost badly to Ronald Reagan.

There are at least two parts to what I call an election's liminal period. For my purposes the first occurs between a candidate's announcement for office and the election.[29] The second runs between the election and the installation of the victor.

The first part, when candidates are pitted against one another to highlight the choice the people are going to make, is a period in which anthropologists expect to find activities that invert the normal order—"just politics" is a standard phrase, often used to accuse somebody of acting appropriately to the election context but in "normal" times. Such activities are often personally exhausting, debilitating, funny, bizarre, and sometimes painful. The lack of compromise, the give and take that in fact makes up political life, is one instance of inversion of reality, as the candidates publicly present themselves

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28 Note, for example, the account a "real" day in the life of the vice president, supposedly before the campaign begins. This is from *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, January 8, 1992, "The President's Understudy, Fourth of Seven Articles," subsection headed: Facing Limitation in an 'Awkward Job,' in a section called "Frequent Political Excursions" by David S. Broder and Bob Woodward.

"On the Republican political circuit, Quayle is almost constantly in demand. He makes a political trip somewhere around the country at least once or twice a week, usually returning the same night . . . . These daylong excursions, for which local party organizations contribute from $8,000 to $15,000 in partial reimbursement of the travel costs, are jampacked. Quayle may leave early enough to give both a breakfast and lunch speech, and usually one at dinner as well. Crammed in between are pep talks to state party organizations, meetings with local newspaper editorial boards, brief news conferences, closed door sessions with local business leaders or other interest groups, and a sprinkling of photo opportunities.

"The party faithful show up with checkbooks. Generally it's $50 for a lunch ticket, $150 to $200 for a reception, and $1,000 to participate in a round-table discussion with Quayle and several dozen other big donors. Often, too, Quayle will squeeze in a round of handshaking at a supermarket, a fast food restaurant or bowling alley, a nostalgic return to the press-the-flesh campaigning at which he excelled in Indiana" (A15).

29 There is, of course, a fractal form to these events. After the initial announcement there are series of contests, caucuses, primaries, or other mechanisms for narrowing down the candidates within each party to one who stands for that party. The *rite de passage* format works on several levels.

as virtuous, unconnected persons not swayed by the efforts of others. Both Carter and Ford exhibited total exhaustion at the end of their 1976 campaigns; they were so hoarse that they could barely speak. Such extreme testing is not untypical of rituals of this kind. Another example is the excruciating and tearful collapse of Edmund Muskie in 1972 at the hands of the press—William Loeb's *Manchester Union Leader*—in Manchester, New Hampshire. This first period with its personal trials and difficulties closes with the election, which invests *the moral authority of the people* in the winner.[30]

The 2000 Presidential election, widely regarded as a frightful bore, turned really interesting when this phase of the rite became suspended by the confused circumstances in Florida. Whoever won Florida would gain enough electoral votes to become president, but the vote was so close, and so marred by voting irregularities, that the winner was not determined until some five weeks after the election. While normal private citizens expected the truth to prevail, many people holding significant positions of public power in the government and in the press felt the system was teetering toward chaos.[31] Except for the fact that brute U.S. power hierarchies briefly appeared from behind the curtain of ritual form, very little of ritual significance was added with this episode. It did, however, invigorate that ritual process to a greater degree than most of those experienced in recent memory. And because the loser, Albert Gore, in fact won the election by a much greater popular margin than John Kennedy had over Richard Nixon in the 1960 election, should negative events overtake the reign of George W. Bush, the legacy of Florida in 2000 may be redefined to take away his conceived legitimacy.[32]

The election winner does not immediately receive the *legal authority of the State*; this only comes later with the inauguration. Anthropologists recognize that this second half of the liminal period can sometimes be very dangerous. Between the Ford/Carter election and the Carter inauguration Henry

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30 Actions which threaten the moral authority invested by the people raise the possibility of impeachment, a process designed to remove the legal authority of the state from the candidate. The Clinton years were one long exercise attempting to deny that Clinton deserved the moral authority of the people, with the result that he nearly lost the authority of the state.

31 The gap between those in power and much of the public is most interestingly explored in the writings of Joan Didion (2001). Time will tell if she is describing a significant breach that will schizmogenisize until significant redress is required.

32 Major U.S. newspapers sought to determine what actually happened in Florida and were about to release their results when the events of September 11, 2001, redefined the situation. With the perceived attack on the United States, George W. Bush, by public ritual the repository of the authority of the state, received the moral authority of the people because the very existence of the state he represented seemed to be threatened. He has been acting accordingly ever since.

Kissinger bitterly criticized the duration of this period. He believed that in the interim between the election and inauguration nobody was in charge of the country, and that, consequently, we were particularly vulnerable to enemy attacks. This may seem humorously overblown, but one must not underestimate the structure of almost paranoid opposition that lies at the center of U.S. political consciousness. If one obvious understanding of this form centers on opposition to Communists *throughout* the twentieth century, Anthony Wallace makes clear in his brilliant historical ethnography, *Rockdale*, that this paranoia has had virtually a fixed place in U.S. political culture since the early 1800s.[33] In any case, Kissinger was not the first intellectual to be deeply worried at the implications of ritual's structure. In 1916 Woodrow Wilson, who was sure he was going to loose his reelection bid to opponent Charles Hughes, was so concerned at the momentous events of the World War I in Europe, which had not yet drawn in the United States, that he felt obligated to resign on election night so there could be a swift resumption of authority:

> "I feel it would be my duty," he wrote Secretary of State Robert Lansing, "to relieve the country of the perils of such a situation at once. The course I have in mind is dependent upon the consent and cooperation of the Vice-President; but if I could gain his consent to the plan, I would ask your permission to invite Mr. Hughes to become Secretary of State and would then join the Vice-President in resigning, and thus open to Mr. Hughes the immediate succession to the presidency." [ibid. 1985:210][34]

Impending danger is often the mode in liminal periods.

False or misleading perceptions aside, this liminal period is crucial in American politics because it moves the election victor from being the representative of a party or platform to being the representative of the State. Those who lose the election quietly disappear from public view while the victor publicly assembles those connections, cabinet officers, diplomatic appointments, etcetera, which appear to represent all of the positions he has attacked or ignored during the campaign. The previous period's inversions are themselves inverted. Traditionally, Democrats put Republicans or business representatives in Commerce and Treasury posts; Republican administrations have installed Blacks in appropriate positions, for example Pierce at HUD, Sullivan at HHS, Colin Powell at State.

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[33] Concluding his discussion of the rise of political anti-masonry, he writes of a group of men who "contributed to the branding of an indelible impression in one part of the American political consciousness that somewhere, somehow, beyond America's shores there exists a satanic empire whose minions are ever at work to destroy the republic and take over the world" (Wallace 1978:346-347).

[34] Boller here quotes Links (1965:153-156).

It is of interest that a similar tactic was employed following the Mondale/Reagan presidential contest of 1984. Although Walter Mondale attempted to bring up the need for raising taxes, this question was not seriously debated during the campaign. But as soon as the election was over a senior Reagan official, David Stockman, publicly raised the issue, and there was, for some Americans at least, a real debate about the wisdom of paying off the debt —that is, raising taxes—or going into further debt. (The public concluded that taxes need not be raised, but saner minds prevailed, and they were.)

To summarize: as with most rituals, U.S. elections go through a three-part process. The candidate's announcement separates him from normal times and normal people as it defines a special period which is filled with odd behavior from the candidate and some of his supporters. After the election when the loser drops out, the victor becomes invested with the moral authority of the people. He must begin to assemble the wherewithal to lead the country, not as he imagined it in his campaign, but more or less as it really is. This done, he is formally installed in office with his inauguration. This rite of incorporation adds to the moral authority conveyed by the election the legal authority of the State. The period between the election and the inauguration, however dangerous it may seem, marks the beginning of a return to reality from the long leave of the campaign.

### *Politics as "Joking Relations"*

In the 1796 presidential campaign "Federalists called [Thomas] Jefferson an atheist, anarchist, demagogue, coward, mountebank, trickster, and Francomaniac, and said his followers were 'cut-throats who walk in rags and sleep amidst filth and vermin'" (ibid.:8).[35] Wilbur Storey, one-time editor of the Detroit *Free Press* and then the Chicago *Times* wrote, "President Lincoln 'evinces his appetite for blood' and called the Republican Party a 'bastard offspring of illicit intercourse, and the faulty amalgamation of incompatible genes'" (Wills 1997:32). These are perhaps different terms than we publicly or privately employ now.[36] But the difference between now and then is only, per-

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35 Boller quotes Burner et al. (1980:124).

36 However, in a *The Washington Post* article called "Michigan Campaign May Earn X Rating," reporter Jon Jeter (*The Washington Post* staff, Friday, August 14, 1998, A04), lets us know things may be returning to normal: "DETROIT—Anyone who prefers civility with their politics probably should steer clear of Michigan this electoral season. The gubernatorial campaign here is shaping up as the nastiest—and perhaps most colorful —in the nation this year." Jeter continues concerning the new Democratic candidate for governor: "Fieger, the brash and bawdy millionaire attorney who became a household name in Michigan for defending suicide doctor Jack Kevorkian, has referred to the state's portly but popular incumbent, Gov. John Engler (R), as fat, moronic, racist, corrupt, and the product of miscegenation between barnyard animals."

haps, that now is a bit, quite a bit, more subdued, regardless of the tempers of G. Gordon Liddy, Rush Limbaugh, and other carriers-on of an old tradition. (The relatively tame word "liberal" may still be said so that it sounds like "communist," "red," or "extremist," or, if you are an anthropologist, "witch.") Which brings me to my next point. Although more could be said of our elections as rites of passage, I feel my use of the model only went from the obvious to the interesting when I began to see how an analysis of African joking relationships could be imposed, exactly and in a detailed fashion, over the election period, the liminal, betwixt-and-between part of the election process.

I take as my model of joking relationship a discussion of the custom from an East African society called the Kaguru, as presented by the British-trained though American anthropologist, Thomas Beidelman (Beidelman 1966b). What helped me forge the initial equation between Beidelman's analysis and our electoral process was the realization that through problems generated in the course of living, the Kaguru reform themselves into two groups that through mutual insulting attempt to rectify whatever problem faces them. And like the Kaguru, U.S. culture transforms itself into two groups for our elections: the Democratic and Republican political parties.[37] And then each group has at each other. Following Beidelman's analysis, by the Kaguru analogy our candidates attempt to purify themselves and/or the body politic by showing how dirty the other person is—by slinging mud at him.

Beidelman's 1966 article is one of the early illustrations of structuralist or structuralist-like analyses provided by British anthropologists in the mid-1960s. Like all such papers of the time, apparently organized by the repetition of dyadic or triadic categories, the paper is a study of ambiguity and the role

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[37] Parties, and the structuring of parties, have complex histories. While a two-party system dominates U.S. history, the relative content of each party changes and sometimes inverts, over time. As one weakens others attempt to merge into the older slot. The moiety-like system is constantly on the verge of breaking into a system of three or more parties. Governor George Wallace's attempt to create a new party towards the end of the 1960s and early 1970s was so successful that legislation was passed to buttress the two main parties, making them virtually financially independent. Each U.S. citizen has the privilege of marking one U.S. dollar to go to the parties at the time he or she files annual income taxes. As the structure tends to vary over time, so does it vary in space. Virtually all states formally part of the Old South veer towards one-party systems dominated as crypto-fiefdoms run by either or both a governor's office or that of a long-standing senator. This is consistent with the "politics" in Immanuel Wallerstein's model of *peripheries* in his modern world system; once having its peripheral position marked by the production of raw materials, to the extent the relation prevails recently it is probably by means of military establishments. In any case, the Democratic party became dominant in the South following the Republican powers and policies associated with Lincoln during and after the Civil War; Nixon then assisted a transformation of that system so that by the late 1960s the South was becoming solidly Republican as the "party of Lincoln" took on many of the attributes and political mandates of the old Democratic party.

of the ambiguous in the creation and recreation of social life. To remind the reader of the ambiguous nature of most of our political figures I shall quote from an editorial in *The Washington Post* from several years back: "the very archetype of the politician in American folklore is the fellow who talks out of both sides of his mouth" (November 18, 1982).[38] As with my discussion of the rites of passage paradigm I shall do no more than demonstrate the relevance of this second model.

Beidelman's central thesis states that Kaguru life is organized in terms of sets of binary contrasts. Over the course of various cycles—agricultural, annual, life, and so forth—acts of individuals, spirits, or gods confuse these fundamental distinctions. Joking relationships are employed during certain rituals involving births, marriages and deaths, during New Years rituals, and in other times because, in one way or another, the Kaguru sense of order becomes obscured. Joking partners and joking behavior reorder the fundamental distinctions through ritual action. Invariably this ritual involves an actor's joking partner taking on pollution. For the Kaguru, "pollution" involves combinations of things or relationships that are supposed to be kept apart. According to Beidelman, Kaguru disorder comes from confused states, and it is through other confused forms that disorder is re-ordered. As often happens in ritual action, inversions are inverted.

Although in almost every election cycle I have observed citizens complaining about the terrible mudslinging—perhaps especially during the 1988 election—from very early in the nineteenth century fantastically brutal forms of insult have characterized American presidential elections. Of the 1824 election Boller writes:

> Newspapers glorified the candidates they were backing in extravagant terms and vilified their opponents in abusive language. They made fun of Adams's slovenly dress and "English" wife, called Clay a drunkard and gambler, charged Crawford with malfeasance in office, and accused Jackson of being a murderer for having authorized the execution of mutineers in 1813. If one took all these charges seriously, sighed one politician, he would have to conclude that "our Presidents, Secretaries, and Representatives, are all traitors and pirates, and the government of this people had been committed to the hands of public robbers." [1984:35][39]

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38 Of Ross Perot and his stands on taxes, Ronald Cohen wrote that his fans "ought to ponder also whether their man is the unflinching truth-teller of legend or living proof that you don't have to be a Republican or a Democrat to talk out of both sides of your mouth" (*The Washington Post*, June 4, 1992, op-ed entitled "Salon Revolutionaries to the Barricades," A29).

39 Boller quotes from Mooney (1974:287). It may be noted that many Republicans certainly thought of the Clinton administration in these draconian terms; and now, with the finan-

British visitors, it seems, were often appalled at the lack of civility in this rhetoric. Although I do not yet have the facts—or an appropriate imaginative ordering of them—to sustain the point, I would suggest that the barbarity of this practice, and the horror with which the English viewed it, followed from the aforementioned Nature/Culture distinction intervening in this part of the election dynamic. Giving up on civility, our candidates seem to have to show they can be brutish. There are, of course, different forms for this. In the 1984 presidential election with Reagan and Bush pitted against Mondale and Ferraro, Bush felt it important to demonstrate his interest, knowledge, and experience in sports when directly debating Ferraro, a woman. These were two people of a generation in which it was obvious that most men were expected to experience nature through sports (and/or at war) and most women were placed on a higher pedestal of culture. One way candidates tend to pollute each other is by positioning themselves close to Nature while demonstrating that their opponent is part and parcel of an ingrained hierarchy, Culture. This is one of the contexts by which the opposition between candidates laid out in the first part of this essay is realized in social action. And this dynamic might go far to explain why recently state governors have had more success achieving nominations and victories as presidents than politicians with considerably more experience in Washington. George W. Bush attended elite private eastern schools, was (a failed) Texas businessman, served in his father's White House staff, was presented with a baseball team to manage and profit from, and then given a governorship. But he *was from* "Texas," and owned a ranch, in stark contrast to Gore, the professional Washington-based politician.

Not only are the processes and occasions relevant here, so are the actors. Amongst the Kaguru joking partners are sometimes cross-cousins. "Cross-cousin" is an anthropological term that refers to a woman or man's father's sister's children or mother's brother's children. In many societies where transparent relations between people are the most important relationships in the culture, the categories we translate as cross-cousin play or model crucial processes. They are "betwixt and between" because, according to Beidelman, they fall between a set of persons between one's immediate kin and complete strangers. Kaguru cross-cousins are not only often joking partners, they are also sometimes the ideal marriage partners. In both cases they transform one state into another: pollution into rectified categories, or people who are not quite related into productive relations for the future.

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cial scandals of the past two years coming to light, many Democrats think the same of Republicans.

Now at first glance it would appear preposterous to say there is anything at all similar between East African joking relationships and modern elections, and Kaguru cross-cousins and U.S. politicians. Politicians do not have to be one's cousins, nor need they participate in births, marriages, and deaths, some of the prime contexts for joking relationships among the Kaguru. However, the state they represent does have to participate in these transitions, by certifying that they happen (with various documents and licenses). And it is interesting that politicians do take part in symbolic deaths and births, namely the graduation ceremonies that define transitions in the U.S. educational system. Not insignificantly, state and local politicians are invited to speak at high school graduations, and nationally prominent state and national politicians regularly appear at college graduations. When he was governor of Virginia, Chuck Robb only showed interest in attending the University of Virginia graduation rite when Ralph Sampson graduated. A former Marine, Robb was a rising star in the U.S. political system. Married to a daughter of President Lyndon Baines Johnson, he became lieutenant governor of Virginia between January of 1978 and January of 1982, governor from 1982 to 1986 and U.S. Senator from January of 1989 to 2001. Ralph Sampson (1979-1983, a three-time National [basketball] Player of the Year) was a 7'4", nationally and internationally recognized basketball star who had the distinction of completing his university degree while retaining his athletic eligibility, before going on to his presumed great NBA future. The impressive Lawn of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, which provides the stage for this rebirth ritual, was filled with national press to cover Sampson's graduation.[40] In the scheme of things, this was an event: two rising national stars were to be seen together.[41] Interestingly, U.S. presidents seldom attend Ivy Leagues or other very highly ranked and prestigious university graduations. Rather, these high-ranked political authorities tend to go, if at all, to relatively modest colleges. (Cabinet members, however, do appear frequently appear at the ceremonies of the elite universities. This particular inversion, however, is another topic altogether.)

We now have a second tie-in between the U.S. educational system and elections. Neither incidental nor an artifact of my methodology, I return to the relations between these formalized procedures. Their intersection results, I

40 About 25,000 people turned out for this graduation ceremony.

41 As it turns out, they were effectively pegged as peers since neither quite achieved the national prominence imagined for them both on that day.

**TABLE 2.** Kaguru joking relations/American elections analogy.*

| Kaguru (East Africa) | | |
|---|---|---|
| Ordinary Sphere of Man | Media or Liminal Objects and/or States | Sphere of Supernatural Beings |
| living persons | ghosts | God |
| living kin | *watani* | ghostly kin (*wasimu*) |
| settlements | bush | land of ghosts |
| land | mountain side | sky |
| life | death/birth | supernatural existence |
| path from one's village | crossroad | path from another village |
| American Version | | |
| People | Politicians | National Heroes (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abe, FDR, HST, JFK) |
| people | parties | state |
| Americans | politicians | foreigners |
| ordinary virtue | politicians (saintly?) | pure virtue |
| ordinary virtue | politicians (corrupt?) | criminal Life |
| Left (good) .....Right (bad) | | |
| Right (good) .....Left (bad) | | |

*Adapted from Beidelman (1966b:359).

suggest, because they effect inverted trajectories in the U.S. system of transformations, and each plays a part-role in the other.

Although there clearly are differences between Kaguru joking relations and the U.S. electoral process, I suggest that there are also striking similarities. I realized the fundamental similarity when I thought about so-called "mudslinging" between candidates. The Kaguru pollute to purify and so do Americans. Committed community members align themselves in one of two divisions and attempt to redefine how their society should be organized. Although debate continues on its effectiveness, casting aspersions on the other person or party's position continues to be a favored tactic in this contest. If

this sparing imposes limits on the content of political debate—often making it simply a contest of negatives rather than an ideal weighing of platforms or directives—Beidelman's analysis of the structure of Kaguru categories, including prime actors in the contest, suggests further insights.

This table shows how U.S. categories resemble those of the Kaguru. The idea here is that key distinctions define fundamental orders, living persons and gods, for example, but that such distinctions are mediated by an in-between category, ghosts in the Kaguru example, that in fact become the focus of attention and mediators between apparent real and ideal qualities.

Just as there is an opposition between Kaguru ordinary people and their gods, so is there in the United States an opposition between most people and their national heroes, such as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. The latter are inscribed in the American landscape, such as the sculpture at Mt. Rushmore, and in historic homes of many localities that are turned into monuments; in these ways they are celebrated and presented as models of appropriate action in public life. Politicians attempt to mediate between these heroes and the people by presenting themselves as some semblance of the former. This is why, recently, both Democrats and Republicans have tried to evoke Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy in their presidential candidates, and why, for example, leading up to his 1988 campaign Gary Hart even tried to mimic John Kennedy's posture. The star-like, or strangely divine-like status of major political actors can be found in a variety of circumstances. An particularly interesting example appears in a book devoted to the place of fast food restaurants in contemporary U.S. culture. In a chapter devoted to showing how "success" is achieved and experienced amidst the contradictory circumstances of fast food franchises, author Eric Schlosser illustrates how the politically famous, including Ronald Reagan, Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell, George Bush senior and his wife Barbara, and the former governor of New York Mario Cuomo, were paid $30,000 to $60,000 for short appearances in front of downtrodden fast food employees and franchise owners. There is little to these appearances (see note 15 above), other than the famous appearing in a circus-like atmosphere in which glitz trumps any discernable content (Schlosser 2001: Chapter 4). But the atmospherics follow from the divine status of the heroes, the founders, of the U.S. political hierarchy.

There is also an opposition between the people and the state. U.S. citizens experience this distinction every 15 April, when their income taxes are due. Non-Americans need to realize that there is a vast industry devoted to making sure the government, in its eyes an artificial, illegitimate entity, does not get from the individual what is rightly his or hers. The parties mediate this opposition in electoral contexts, although their roles outside elections, especially

now, are almost non-existent.[42]

The contrast between The United States and its allies or enemies is something Americans expect politicians to mediate. In the 1988 presidential campaign George H. W. Bush advertised the fact that he was a friend of Gorbachev, the leader of the U.S. archenemy, the former Soviet Union. Other of the distinctions could be elaborated here. Many Americans, for example, rather assume that all politicians are corrupt, by virtue of their powerful connections, willingness to compromise, and so forth. But finally, consider the contrasts Left (good)—Right (bad) and the converse, Right (good)—Left (bad). Although these categories do not fit unequivocally into the "ordinary"/"superordinary" distinction because they entirely depend upon the view of the observer, Left and Right, or Liberal and Conservative, remain major vehicles for framing the rhetoric of political discourse. These days the winning strategy usually entails a politician depicting himself in the middle while trying to demonstrate just how extreme his opponent is, Left or Right, as the case might be.

Let me summarize the argument: As among the Kaguru, the United States periodically reconfigures itself into two units, selects people to represent those units, and, in the course of the election, pits the two against each other. Nominally organized by formal values and ideas—the so-called party platforms which they will pursue in policy if elected, in fact much of their behavior entails mutual insults. From this "mudslinging" the country is to emerge ren-

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[42] It would be interesting to explore the relationship between the declining significance of parties and the increasing dislike of taxes in American public life. The parties have played smaller and smaller roles in mediating between our categories of person and state, a change that I think reflects a massive shift in the U.S. and world economy. The U.S. increasingly is becoming defined by a bipolar opposition between fewer very highly skilled laborers and managers and many more unskilled workers filling fewer and fewer manufacturing jobs. So the ties between the person and the state must become more direct, apparently personal and emotional. For some, selling to the highest bidder the privilege of spending a night in the Lincoln bedroom would be a manifestation of this during the last decade or so. Perks, however, have long been for sale. The White House Nixon tapes reveal that ambassadorships where virtually sold to the highest bidder—for campaign contributions—in Nixon's epoch. See "Nixon Set Minimum Contribution for Choice Diplomatic Posts," by George Lardner Jr. and Walter Pincus, *The Washington Post* staff writers, Thursday, October 30, 1997, A19. While presidents have long bestowed U.S. ambassadorships on big campaign contributors, Richard M. Nixon put a specific price tag on the practice: "My point is, my point is that anybody who wants to be an ambassador must at least give $250,000," the president told White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman on June 23, 1971, according to a newly transcribed tape. "Yeah," Haldeman agreed, and then proposed a minimal donation threshold. "I think any contributor under $100,000 we shouldn't consider for any kind of thing." See also Epstein (1996:342) for a discussion of Armand Hammer, his mistresses, probable criminal activities spanning decades, and how he ingratiated himself with the Reagan and Bush Republican powers, all of which afforded him a pardon at the cost of some $110,000.

ewed and redefined. But the ambiguous nature of this interaction is coupled by the ambiguous nature of the candidates, who, given the contradictions of society, must constantly speak out of both sides of their mouths.

Let me close this section with a final observation: As far as I can recall, from perhaps 1956 or 1960 on, there have been two presidential elections which failed to engage serious mudslinging, failed to significantly conform to the tenor of a joking encounter. In each of these cases the dominant party/candidate did not have to engage the other party, did not have to defend himself against the other's accusations. Neither the winning candidate nor its party took the other seriously enough to mount a sober campaign against its opponent. These two examples are the 1972 election between Nixon and McGovern and the 1984 election between Reagan and Mondale. Although serious issues divided the two candidates, in each case Nixon and Reagan did not have to and did not engage the criticism of their respective opponents. Each easily won by what is called a "landslide" in U.S. elections.[43] I would like to suggest that it follows, more or less automatically, that after each of these flawed elections the country became engaged in exceedingly complex and public scandals and trials: the Watergate affair that led to Nixon's resignation just before he was impeached, and the host of trials that continued into the early 1990s concerning Reagan's administration.[44] In the Watergate case, secret employ-

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[43] Votes are counted in two ways in presidential elections, first by popular vote, then by the electoral college vote. The latter is the official determinant of the election. Each state has as many electoral votes to cast as it has senators (two per state) and members of the House of Representatives (determined by official population figures, and variable over time). Whoever wins the popular vote in any state receives all that state's electoral votes. This is what allowed Gore to win the popular election in 2000 but loose in what is called the Electoral College. Any candidate winning 55 percent or more of the popular vote wins by a "landslide," and is likely to have won a much greater percentage of the electoral vote. *In* 1972 Nixon won 61.8 percent of the popular vote, and 96.8 of the electoral vote. Reagan's figures were 59.1 and 97.6.

[44] Just beyond my memory and any detailed reading is, of course, the succession of Democratic wins of the White House from 1932 to 1948, with Roosevelt winning the 1936, 1940, and 1944 elections with little trouble. By about 1948, of course, the U.S. entered one of the biggest scandal/scapegoating periods of the twentieth century, the Red Scare led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. It is widely known that Dwight Eisenhower agreed to become a Republican presidential candidate in order to preserve the two-party system—he had no overt leanings to what the Republicans represented. And it is also common knowledge that Adlai Stevenson never expected to beat Eisenhower and thought it important for Eisenhower to win. Clearly a sense of structural balance guided these men's conscious actions. To these observations must be added the widely held belief that things are getting worse, which may be inaccurate historically; that increasingly U.S. elections are not raising significant issues of state, and that perhaps, as a consequence, increasingly the politics of state are being addressed in scandals or investigations that appear to be about moral or legal rather than 'political' questions. These considerations need to be evaluated along with analyses suggesting that citizen participation in major and minor elections is declining dramatically.

ees of Nixon's Republican administration were caught breaking into offices of the Democratic Party in the Watergate apartment and office-building complex in Washington, D.C. in 1972, before the election. As investigations of the break-in developed over the next two years, a number of related and unrelated illegal activities came to light leading to the resignation of the vice president, resignation or criminal proceedings against many top people in Nixon's administration, and then eventually Nixon's own resignation in August of 1974, when it became obvious that he would be impeached.[45]

Additionally, one might note the more general failures of our electoral system by pointing to the increasing frequency of public scandal. The suggestion here is not so much that the public is deservedly scandalized at untoward turns of behavior. Rather, because the political institutions seem incapable of directly confronting issues of state, these same issues are confronted indirectly through other forms, often of persecution.[46] One form or ritual action takes the place of another.

I am not suggesting a cathartic function for these rituals; I am saying U.S. society, like all others, generates conflict and has to deal with it. Elections, the proclaimed method for addressing the content of the state, arguably fails to deal with these conflicts. Other means come to the fore, it would seem, to do so. Beyond the political and historical questions these hypotheses raise with respect to the United States, these relations, the substitution of one form of ritual action for another, raise important questions about competing or complementary ritual forms as social systems construct their modes of life.

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45 For a summary and list of suggested readings refer to http://gi.grolier.com/presidents/ea/side/watergte.html.

46 In 1992 Ross Perot withdrew from presidential consideration during the Democratic National Convention which nominated Bill Clinton, nominally because he said the Democrats had revitalized themselves (but by the Wednesday of the Republican National Convention for re-nominating George Bush, August 19, 1992, a convention dominated and perhaps climaxed by Barbara Bush's address and the promulgation of "family values," Perot was saying he might come back in). The allegedly real reason behind Perot's withdrawal was his budget analysis, which revealed how much would have to be cut from government services and how much taxes would have to be raised. Perot knew Americans would not stand for such a confrontation with reality in the context of an election. One is tempted to observe recent decisions (February and March 2001) in the new Bush administration to overturn ergonomics regulations, ten years in the making and effected at the close of the Clinton administration, and a turn-around from campaign promises concerning reducing $CO^2$ admissions. Will these just be new examples of politicians making decisions after the fact and with respect to pleasing their friends or business cronies? Bush's backers are from the Texas and national financial and oil/energy sector of the U. S. economy (e.g., Enron Corporation). If so, once again the election system has failed to address significant political differences that in fact stand behind the candidates.

## Part III: What Elections Do

***From Difference to Identity (and Vice-versa)***

If the paradigms I have briefly sketched capture parts of the experiential structure of major American political elections, it is by no means clear that the analysis quite explains what it is that the elections do. My analysis locates elections in specifically American cosmological tenets, such as the Nature/Culture distinction; it also shows how the format of elections conforms to ritual orders that are so common the form seems to represent a given in the human condition; and finally it suggests that mudslinging and the ambiguous nature of politicians resemble an order like that of Kaguru joking relations. Yet I doubt very much that this analysis at all explains why elections continue to so engage the American consciousness. Aside from demonstrating in numerical terms that the winner is victorious, what is it that U.S. elections accomplish?

I shall try to answer this question and bring this essay to a conclusion by placing at the center of my analysis the educational system and making an observation the on the movement of funds that influence the electoral process. We return now to the reciprocal appearances of elections in the U.S. educational system and politicians in school graduations, those culminating moments of the educational system. An old sociological comparison coupled with a straightforward application of the structuralist method suggest ways these realities may be combined, and at least one answer to our final question —What is it that elections do?

The relevant sociological concepts here are mechanical and organic solidarity. In conventional terms mechanical solidarity refers to a social system, or aspect of a social system, that is governed by the conceived similarities of its constituent units. The organic analogy refers to the body: the whole maintains itself through the complementary functioning of differences.[47] My structuralist insight came from thinking about the implications of one of the

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47 The initial impetus for undertaking this paper was inspired while reading a letter in Man from Louis Dumont in which he writes: "Dissatisfaction with currently available views of the matter, including wars, totalitarianism, and the political vicissitudes within my own country in the last two centuries was one of the incentives that urged me to try an anthropological key, i.e., to set that political history within a comparative anthropological perspective . . ." (Dumont 1987:747-748). However, this particular section was stimulated long before I read this letter by his much earlier paper of 1986 (originally 1965); see especially footnote 2 (1986:61) in which Dumont locates his analysis of Western individualism with respect to Durkheim's discussion of the mechanical/organic contrast (and Toennies's drawing on *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*).

ways these models allow us to envision transformations through the U.S. election system.

As is true for many western societies, American political consciousness strives towards a mechanical ideal, that is, everyone is, under the law or for voting purposes, equal.[48] But Americans also that assume everyone will end up having a different job and different prospects for prosperity, according to education, skills, connections, and so forth. At the "economic" level then, the forms of association are organic.[49] Americans think mechanically about politics while economically their reality is decidedly organic.

**TABLE 3.** Elections as transforming a "this" to a "that."

| Ideological Orientation | Economic Model | Political Form | Education | Elections |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mechanical | − | + | ↓ | ↑ |
| Organic | + | − | | |

In elections, of course, much effort goes toward establishing equality, a likeness between the candidate and the voter, or what the voter should be. This attempt accounts for much of the increasingly personal nature of contemporary campaigns. A 1992 description of the 1988 Bush-Quayle campaign provides an interesting illustration of this point. Political reporters for *The Washington Post*, Broder, Woodward, and Greenberg, describe the scene this way:

> Riding through the streets of West Carrollton, Ohio, at the end of the first difficult week of the 1988 campaign, Dan Quayle recalled in a recent interview, he and his wife, Marilyn, shared a lighthearted mood with George and Barbara Bush.

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48 The greatest embarrassment of the 2000 fiasco in Florida was that it showed that in fact this tenet is not true: discounted votes significantly transcended expected errors in the system and a majority of the voters who were discounted, or prevented from voting, were minorities.

49 The situation is in fact a bit more complicated than this. Since the Reagan presidency, the potency of the model economic actor regained its cultural dominance and signaled a significant reduction of qualitative differences to a common quantitative denominator—(a desire for) money. American common sense sees our political forms as ideally mechanical and our economic roles realistically organic, but mechanical models clearly dominate the professional economists' analysis of the U.S. economy and a significant part of our cultural environment. In any case, it is of extreme analytical interest that by 1989 this reduction of all to money was beginning to undergo much public criticism. Note Michael Lewis's disturbingly funny *Liar's Poker*. By late 1991 another book, less funny yet far more analytical and thorough was also on the nation's bestseller lists (Stewart 1991).

> The couples were playing what they called the "Limousine game," competing to see who could make eye contact with the most roadside spectators. If one of them succeeded in making direct contact with a voter, even for just a fleeting second, that voter would be a supporter for life.
>
> The four cheered and jeered each other, laughter cascading all around. "He [Bush] is very good at it, much better than I," Quayle said. "Eye contact. You have to have eye contact."[50]

Again, this contrasts dramatically with much else in American life where differences of education or job, for example, are defined or deflected by avoiding contact, by one or another kind of spatial boundary (Ruesch and Bateson [1951]; Perin 1977). These differences are only mediated by money and contracts.

Now the structuralist insight began to take shape when I realized that one massive institution is predicated on converting U.S. citizens from a mechanical conception of citizenship into a realization of organic differences. This institution is America's educational system. The hope is that all children can start school with an equal chance of rising to the top, and a great deal of material and mental energy goes into trying to assure that equal starting point (e.g., through means like the 1960s Head Start program). But nobody assumes that youths will graduate from the educational system as adults who are all the same. To the contrary, they should graduate having become different, assuming the occupations to which their educational failures and successes direct them. Graduation ceremonies indeed signal the deaths and rebirths of identities, and for nearly two centuries educational institutions have been designated as the key institutions upon which the country will rise or fail.[51] Thus the American educational system begins with persons mechanically defined and turns them into organic beings.

Now reversing this process, I propose, is exactly what our political system attempts to do. Through the complex electoral process it gathers disparate interests and quantities of money from individuals, corporations, innumer-

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50 *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, January 8, 1992, a small section separately entitled "A Friendship Almost Like Family," by David S. Broder, Bob Woodward, and David Greenberg in "The President's Understudy, Fourth of Seven Articles," in the David S. Broder and Bob Woodward series on Dan Quayle (A14). There are many dimensions to the personalization of the campaigns, the prominence of television being only one. This, however, is an instance of a monumental component of mass American culture, perhaps first and most readily experienced through the likes of McDonald's restaurants. Under the guise of doing it all for the individual, consumption is organized as capitalist production.

51 For this note I thank Dr. Mary Taylor Huber, Senior Scholar, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who reported it many years ago and confirmed it during a recent personal communication.

able associations, labor unions and other units—much of this fundraising takes place behind the scenes, and is increasingly described as if it was in itself polluting[52]—and homogenizes all of it into bits of information or peculiar, ambiguous persons that, at each level, appeal to values shared by as large a segment of the population as possible. The abstraction, of course, has to be the most complete with presidential campaigns, because these candidates have to reach across the entire spectrum of voters. Organic differences in the society, and real conflict, disappear under the umbrella of an opposition between Democrats and Republicans. And there is much evidence to suggest the political labels mean little when money is at stake.[53] If at a local level this process can—and it often does, with candidates actually having to prove their competence—deal with concrete issues, the election process as it moves to higher and higher levels of political jurisdiction, debates messages that become increasingly abstract, increasingly personal, and increasingly a test of the candidate's virtue as defined at the beginning of this paper. All differences are reduced to two parties, and ultimately, and I think increasingly intensively, to two people, divided by their ability to locate themselves and their opponents on the Nature/Culture divide.

This homogenization of economic interest and difference[54] into political equality finds, of course, its ultimate realization on the day of the election as people with identical votes choose between, as we increasingly see, identical candidates. But of course the homogenization of these differences, if arguably

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52 There is a massive literature on this topic, with, in fact, many organizations devoted to uncovering the supposed hidden realities of how private interests control the public political process. I would argue that most of these attempts begin with the assumption that the mechanical model of contemporary U.S. (and Western) society is the only legitimate one. Among older and recent works on the topic see Lewis (1998) and Palast (2002).

53 Note how PACs (political action committees) fund money regardless of the nominal political persuasion of the PAC members. In a letter to *The Washington Post*, the ex-senator from Wisconsin William Proxmire notes "Although the medical profession is overwhelmingly Republican and conservative, these political action committees showed they had no intention of permitting convictions and principles to interfere with putting their money where the political power is. Every one of the top ten recipients of these medical and insurance contributions was a Democrat. Here is transparent evidence that these medical and insurance contributions were overwhelmingly designed to buy favorable legislation and to keep their $800 billion per year health care gravy train running over the bodies of American taxpayers rather than to serve any political principles American doctors believe in . . ." August 21, 1992, A24. See also *The New York Times* of October 18, 1996, "Business is Biggest Campaign Spender, Study Says," by Leslie Wayne.

54 I believe a phrase like this, "economic interest and difference," is an accurate description of the local categories but should not be presumed to accurately sum up the social system, which is of course global, and has been for centuries. National identities, and the "political" processes and rituals that accompany and build them must be understood as carved out of the encompassing regional social system in which they are located.

part of a commonly found characteristic of many social/ritual systems, also means that the United States must pay the price of decreasing its ability to discuss real and pressing differences, differences between persons who are not truly equal.

So, if it is asked what our elections do, an answer, I suggest, is this: They convert, temporarily, the facts of a complex and disparate order into an imaginary semblance of mechanical solidarity and unity. And this is what makes some think the historical trajectory of election system is toward increasing vacuousness. This, however, may merely be personal opinion, useful data for another kind of observer.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have looked at U.S. elections through the lens of four analytical constructs: The place of Nature/Culture distinctions in American culture; patterns commonly found in rites of passage throughout the world; the play of ambiguity as found in joking relationships; and in the reciprocal engagement of mechanical and organic forms in our educational and electoral systems. Interrelationships between these different models are more evident than my discussion here has had time to develop. Being able to reveal these patterns has been gratifying, and I do not think I have simply imposed these models on the data. For their juxtaposition has made me see things and relationships that extend beyond what I imagined when I began toying with this problem.

There is more. I am an anthropologist committed to analyzing and making known the diversity of human existence. So this is not merely an issue of displaying the analytical power of several theoretical perspectives in contemporary anthropology. In what I hope is a profound way, my issue is one of applied anthropology. The apparent failures of the U.S. political system domestically are not my only concern. When I began the efforts that have resulted in this paper, it was becoming increasingly obvious that our elections were vacuous charades incapable of addressing mounting social problems, with the United States foisting its vision of order on the countries of Central America, ensuring the killing of thousands of people in the process. By the late 1980s the U.S. was supremely confident that its own system, "democracy," would be the salvation of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere. Examples are legion, and a new mission is under way as I complete this work. In fact, the words "liberty," "democracy," and "freedom" are used with reckless abandon by many leading political and intellectual spokespersons. One is inclined not so much to become cynical about these words as to think that, perhaps, U.S. politicians are consciously trying to mystify the body politic. In any

case, much care needs to be taken so that the spread of what some call "democracy" does not become the uncritical resuscitation of imperialism under another name. For over a hundred years the United States' missionary impulse has been manifested in mysterious ways and in more than one guise. Some temperance is due. And a good way for anthropologists the world over to respond to this situation is to analyze seriously its cultural accouterments.

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# 選舉有甚麼好?
## 美國大選的人類學分析

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人類學是在西方社會企圖瞭解與秩序化非西方社會之際而發展出來的。本文即是利用該段歷史中所開拓出的知識工具，來檢視一項屬於目前西方的霸權社會——美國——最根本的實踐之一，選舉。文中將選舉視爲儀式過程，並提出有關這個習俗之形式與作用的相關假說。作者認爲選舉在美國是一種儀式建構，深深地嵌在美國的歷史與結構裡，以及其在世界體系中的位置。職是之故，這套選舉儀式實踐並不必然地適用於其他地方。除了民族誌及理論上的旨趣，本文亦加入了應用人類學的討論。文中運用美國開國至今的材料，以具有典範地位的總統大選爲例，描述四種構成選舉之不同、卻又彼此息息相關的元素。首先是一套「自然」／「文化」對比在美國的運作方式。這一組對比是美國文化裏最重要的宇宙觀秩序的機制。它已內化於親屬結構和過程當中；而早在十八世紀，美國就已藉此機制在世界體系中形塑國家的認同。第二個儀式典範，顯示了有關通過儀式之一套結構概念可以用來組織大選這段時期的時間。在候選人宣告參選的分隔儀式以及總統當選人就職大典的整合儀式之間，存在著一個我們已可預知的倒轉 (inversions) 與顯露出危機之中介時期。第三個儀式典範是藉著對「非洲戲謔關係」(African joking relationships) 的分析，來勾勒出選舉中介時期，某些儀式行爲中看似更荒誕不經的面向。藉由美國選舉與東非戲謔關係間顯著的差異，作者指出政客與政治策略暫時性地出現在美國的教育結構內這一種古怪的現象。戲謔關係的比喻是要指出這一類的儀式，顯然對於美國平民大眾來說不太具有說服力；而醜聞和控訴行徑反而逐漸成爲美國政治對話的途徑。對人類學家而言，這類看似巫術指控的行爲，似乎取代了另一套未成功的行動模式。最後一個範式則回到選舉結構與教育之實踐兩者間的關係來談。作者認爲整個選舉的公式就如同一種儀式的構思，將美國人的意識暫時地轉移到機械性聯結的意象 (image of mechanic solidarity)。美國教育結構原本旨在創造出有機的差異 (organic differences)，而選舉卻透過其儀式性過程，倒轉了這原本受教育結構所影響的改變。本來美國教育制度的基本理念，是將具有相等潛能的小孩塑造出社會角色極爲不同的各色人等，選舉卻將這些顯而易見的差異重新再組合成一種想像的與暫時性的平等。

**關鍵詞：美國，選舉，儀式分析，結構主義，意識形態**