

## CHAPTER 19

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# THE POLITICS OF NEOLIBERAL RITUALS

### *Performing the Institutionalization of Liminality at Trade Fairs*

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The AI for Good Global Summit is THE leading United Nations platform for global and inclusive dialogue on AI. The Summit is hosted each year in Geneva by the ITU.

—AI for Good Global Summit website, <https://aiforgood.itu.int/>

THE third AI for Good Summit took place in Geneva on May 28–31, 2019. The program featured keynote speeches, workshops, and plenaries that were interlaced with panels organized into streams on specialized topics with titles such as “Scaling AI for Good,” “AI for Space,” and “AI Education and Learning.” It also offered training workshops and social events, including a musical performance by artists working with AI in the UN General Assembly. In the exhibition space, thematically grouped stands presented projects, objects, and ideas. The stage in the exhibition space had a full program of lectures, most of which were exposés by representatives from the stands. At the far end of the fair there was an art space curated by the Berlin STATE Studio—Science Art Gallery.<sup>1</sup> A driverless car parked in the center of the exhibition space was a favored background for selfies and group photographs. A place to take a picture of yourself with the AI for Good logo boot located right behind it was mostly ignored. Perhaps characteristically for a context where knowledge is provisional, in need of updating and improvement, there was never a printed (or pdf) version of the program, the participant list, or the floor map. Instead an app, updated real time, was at work during the summit. A selective web archive with snippets from the conference is now available on the site advertising the next AI for Good summit, in 2020.<sup>2</sup>

The AI for Good (AIfG) had much in common with trade fairs generally, including the military and security fairs that I spend considerable time at.<sup>3</sup> Just as there, companies and private actors were omnipresent. The main sponsor of the ITU summit was XPrize, a foundation that distributes awards primarily aimed to encourage technological innovation

in a range of areas.<sup>4</sup> The opening keynote speakers were from Microsoft and Siemens. Many panels had speakers from the private sector. PWC and Deloitte had stands presenting their respective projects on AI, including their ethical guidelines for organizational integration of AI. Furthermore, the AIfG was organized in a manner analogous to the trade fairs. The types of multilayered, interlaced activities, the proclaimed inclusivity and globality, the arrangement of the space, and the presentation of the event as “THE leading” and most important, recurring, “each year” event of its genre would be characteristic of any trade fair. This would be true even if—as the 2019 AIfG—they were only the third of their kind.

These similarities between military and security trade fairs and the AIfG Summit organized by the ITU are not surprising. Rather, the basic traits of the trade fair recur across multistakeholder events, summits, and conferences that exert a “discreet power” in global governance (Garsten and Sörbom 2018). The trade fair has become a political governance ritual of sorts. Trade fairs are spaces in which politics is performed. As this chapter will explore, trade fairs play a crucial role in generating and enshrining the legitimacy and authority of decentralized, distributed, market-based orders. They are neoliberal ordering “rituals” (discussed in the first section). They are all the more effective as the sacred and magical and the affective and embodied anchor order not only broadly but deeply and individually (second section). The result of this ordering is a form of institutionalized liminality that, contrary to the hopes of Victor Turner, is anything but progressive (third section). As the chapter concludes, precisely because the trade fair rituals are an increasingly common form of governance, recognizing the ways they build inegalitarian instability into our societies is of the essence. It is a condition for transforming neoliberal politics and for governing otherwise.

## TRADE FAIRS: NEOLIBERAL ORDERING RITUALS

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In her overview of ritual theory, Catherine Bell (1998, chapter 5) argues that what unites ritual-like activities is their formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacral symbolism, and that they are performances. On that account, trade fairs are rituals. Like religious celebrations, parliamentary openings, or mundane morning tooth-brushing, trade fairs convene the participants in a trade at specified repeated intervals in specific spaces. They follow a range of rules involving a set of specific rites encompassing the body and material props. While there are many sides to these performances, for the purpose of this chapter I am interested in one aspect, namely their politics and the way they contribute to social integration and ordering. I argue that trade fair rituals play an important role in negotiating order, order of the specific, neoliberal, kind.

### Ritual Ordering

Many other sociologists and anthropologists see rituals as essential for stabilizing order, not because rituals are necessarily conservative, enforcing and reproducing orders in an unchanging fashion. Rather more interestingly, rituals are crucial precisely because they

provide space for transforming and reimagining orders (e.g., Collins 2014; Lukes 1975; Rai 2010). For example, from Turner's perspective, in rites of passage for girls becoming women and boys men, or when addressing the consequences of drought, illness, or war, rituals were crucial for dealing with the inescapable instability of life, with the conflicts, contradictions, and clashes that make social life inherently uncertain and indeterminate. He therefore embraces and affirms Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoffs' (1977) understanding of the place of law as a "secular ritual" that stabilizes order. As they put it, "Ritual is a declaration of form *against* indeterminacy, *therefore* indeterminacy is always present in the background of any analysis of ritual. Indeed there is no doubt that any analysis of social life must take account of the dynamic relation between the formed and the 'indeterminate'" (cited in Turner 1988, 94, original emphasis).

Trade fairs are an analogous declaration of form against the indeterminacy of the market order. Who is a legitimate participant in these markets? Where are (or should be) the boundaries of what can legitimately be bought and sold? Who is responsible for regulating, and what shape should the regulation take? Are there overarching values or norms that can and should inform the answers? These questions are central to any market order. They are particularly pressing in security markets. Commercial military services are the product of markets, not mercenaries (Chesterman and Lehnardt 2007), and the state monopoly on the legitimate use of force is losing its practical significance (Leander 2019). Yet it is uncertain what has taken its place. It is tempting to formalistically affirm that nothing significant is changing (Leander 2014, 2015–6). The massive growth of security and military markets (and the enormous spending, competence, and money that flows into them) nonetheless feeds an uncertainty about whether or not this is true.

Trade fairs alleviate this uncertainty. They confirm that even if order may be transforming, it is legitimate and orderly. Participating companies that produce arms or provide conventional intelligence studies are joined by universities presenting research projects, public institutions such as NATO or the public police, as well as a range of perhaps unexpected characters such as travel agents or companies specializing in flying drones for filming or in managing crowds in supermarkets. By bringing them together, the trade fairs provide a sense of who actually is in the field. In so doing they also open up for shifting and (re)negotiating the hierarchies, rules, and values in the field. In the talk among the participants, in the selection and persuasiveness of the keynotes, in the success of the stands, and in the informal discussions and the off-venue events, the understanding of what the field is, where it is heading, what really matters in it, and what rules and regulations pertain shift and evolve. The trade fairs, like the Grammy Awards (Anand and Watson, 2004), function as "tournament rituals" of sorts. They "distribute prestige in 'situated' performances"; "enact a highly charged ceremonial form designed to attract the collective attention of a field"; they serve as "a medium for surfacing and resolving conflicts about the legitimacy of field participants"; and they "tighten the horizontal linkages within the field" (59). Except that trade fairs do so in a characteristically commercial, decentralized, and provisional fashion.

## Ordering Indeterminacy

Unlike the tournament ritual or rites of passage, the performances taking place in the trade fair create no univocal, singular outcome or order. There is not even one clear competition,

taking place on one stage, evaluated by one jury, and resulting in one award winner, or one for each of the categories of the tournament, as there is for Grammy Awards. Rather, in the trade fair (and at the AIfG) everything is plural; the stages, the juries, and the winners are multiple and contested. Trade fairs affirm a commodified commercial open order.

Commercial orders must allow for competition and constant innovation and change. The cult of creativity in contemporary society is intimately connected to neoliberalism. It locates innovation at the core of governance (Reckwitz 2012). Innovation and change become ends in and of themselves. “Whatever is pronounced ‘outdated’ or relegated to the ‘past’ is no longer recoverable” (Wolin 2008, 97). Innovation also becomes associated with what we, with Harmut Rosa (2013), might term “social acceleration,” with the fact that innovation and change have to come at an ever more rapid pace. Unsurprisingly, therefore, at trade fairs, as in the AIfG, emphasis is placed on the value of openness, on the adaptability of the goods and services on offer. A logical extension of this is the emphasis placed on the possibility of not only adjusting to and solving any problem a customer might have but also on integrating their ideas and ambitions in an effort to co-create and steer innovation. Advertising generally—and advertising of tracking technologies specifically—is consequently replete with appeals to the possibility of working with and developing the imagination of all involved (Leander 2013, 2019). This is as true of the advertising of blockchain technologies at the Future of Enterprise Technology FET in London as it is of the presentations about possible uses of AI at the AIfG in Geneva.<sup>5</sup> The innovations and technologies turn into any kind of application, applicable to anybody’s needs, anywhere and at any time. This malleable “any-” tending to transform itself into an expanding, shapeshifting “every-” is omnipresent in trade fairs. It grows out of a competition that lends its dynamics to the commercial, neoliberal order. As such it is not surprising or in any way unexpected. However, it clearly matters for the kind of order established and for the rituals establishing it.

Trade fairs do not perform a fixed and determinate order, not even temporarily. They enact the legitimacy of the *indeterminacy* and *disorder* at the core of neoliberal governance. The order enshrined by the trade fairs revolves around potentiality. The Hitachi stand at the FET in Amsterdam captures it well: a table full of little red plastic ducks with the text “inspire the next” printed on their breasts (figure 19.1) was next to a space for experimenting with virtual-reality equipment. Hitachi, a tech giant with deep roots in Japan, is focusing ahead and on its customers.<sup>6</sup> Who could possibly know where the next important innovation and creative move will lead? To accommodate and embrace a future unknown, necessarily different from the present, requires accepting and encouraging the appearance of new actors, rules, and values that will reshuffle and perhaps destroy the hierarchy of existing ones. For Hitachi this might not be so difficult. The company representative laughs when I ask if “inspiring the next” might displace Hitachi or make the company disappear altogether. The thought is simply too far off. More surprising is how the representative of FACTOM, a “blockchain innovations company,”<sup>7</sup> unprompted, tells me that of course they cannot be sure that they, or indeed the branch of FACTOM they represent at the fair, will still be around next year. They promptly proceed to tell me that this is how things should and must be if the FACTOM protocol is to remain open to development and transformation, which is not only desirable but necessary for it to retain its usefulness.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, trade fairs are rituals for negotiating and transforming order. They are “field configuring events” in which the “relations between positions” are negotiated and firmed up and the rules, regulations, and values associated with these positions are affirmed and



**FIGURE 19.1.** Hitachi Stand (Detail) in *Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud*, Amsterdam 19–20 June 2019.

legitimized (Moeran 2011, 86). However, the orders the trade fairs institute are orders of indeterminacy, disorder, and openness. The organization of the trade fairs reflects this. The rules and rationales of the fairs are renegotiated from year to year. The floor arrangement is never quite the same. The thematic streams, workshops, and seminars shift, as do keynotes. Moreover, since many trade fairs compete, there is an instability in which fair matters to whom. For example, whereas the Security and Counter Terror Expo (SCTX) had large cybersecurity sections up to 2016, after that the sections shrank as specialized cybersecurity fairs attracted the professional visitors. At the same time, crowd management moved into the SCTX and became a subtheme or stream in its own right, engaging a new range of exhibitors, rules, and values to be negotiated at the fair. The foundational categories around which the trade fairs revolve, as well as the details of what and whom they involve and how, are, in other words, themselves up for grabs as the fairs turn their own logic of ritually ordering indeterminacy upon themselves. They, just as the orders they institute and legitimize, are a perpetuum mobile (Moeran 2011, 86; see also Delacour and Leca 2011). Before discussing the political significance of this, the next section insists that focusing on how is analytically crucial for understanding the firm grip on the political orders they establish.

## PERFORMING SACRED AND AFFECTIVE TRADE FAIR RITES

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References to rituals invoke more than simply negotiating orders. The term *ritual* is a pointer also to the magical and the affective or embodied involved in performing order (Rai 2014). It would be easy—indeed comfortable and comforting—to dispense with this and go with the view that has become common sense, namely that markets and the orders associated with them are instrumentally rational, a quintessential expression of the disenchanting capture of the modern subject in the Weberian iron cage of rationality. Invoking rituals questions this common sense. It connects to the long tradition—from Kant at least—that takes critique beyond the sociological, directing attention to the place of the aesthetic and affective in generating practices (e.g., Honneth 2007; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, chapter 6). Tending to the magical and affective aspects in the context of reflection on the place of trade fairs in enacting a commercial, neoliberal ordering is all the more appropriate as it takes substantial effort to miss their significance at trade fairs.

### Reinstating the Magic of Capitalism

Susan Strange (1999) saw the current political order (she was mostly interested in global finance) as expressing a market civilization whereby companies were gods and the managers were their high priests. It is useful to take this reference to religion and its magic more literally than Strange intended it and to explore in more detail the place of religious magic in the enactment of that order. Focusing on the magic rites of the ordering rituals at trade fairs is a way of doing so and directing attention to what the Comaroffs (1999, 281) term “the effervescent new spirit” of contemporary capitalism. The “forces at once spirited and



ostensibly arcane” that the Comaroffs (2018, 296) describe as “vibrant actants” in the occult economies of contemporary South Africa also have a central role at the enlightened trade fairs of Western Europe.

By way of illustration, consider the magic performed in the rite of speeches in the context of any trade fair. When Jean-Philippe Courtois of Microsoft gives his opening keynote at the AIfG, he is completing a rite that is part of most trade fairs. His speech is part of the opening, setting the tone for the fair to come. An assistant fit for the Grammy Awards introduces him. In a glamorous purple dress, she walks into a flashing light show with music. In his speech, Courtois argues for a specific understanding of the AI order and the values associated with it. True to form and context, his speech is multimedia, mixing film, music, and a simultaneous on-screen transcription of the words spoken. In his performance, the Microsoft representative<sup>9</sup> is affirming a specific order. He outlines the “opportunities” of an “AI already there,” a “principled approach” and an “ethical decision framework” for handling it. He outlines some of the Microsoft educational initiatives, including the DigiGirlz, the BlackGirlsCode, the YouthSpark, and the AI Business School.<sup>10</sup> As he does this, he is creating the rules, the values, and the community of this order, the community that he represents. He performs “the magic of ministry,” the fascinating process by which the minister is creating the community he represents in the process of representing it (Bourdieu 1992, 2000; Wacquant 2005). The magic Courtois performs instates the order, rules, values, and community his company stands for. However, it is also a rite extending beyond the boundaries of Microsoft. For this to succeed, the rite depends not only on his performance but also on the film he shows, the flashy assistant, and the setting of the stage that makes his audience identify with the performance that can hence work its “re-fusing” magic (Alexander 2004, 527; Rai 2015). It also of course depends on the event organizers who allowed him to be there and on the willing participants. Whether or not the rite works its magic, the presence of Courtois as an opening keynote is an affirmation of the authority he enjoys.

Opening speeches are one of many rites that recur across trade fairs. Trade fairs also usually have a range of smaller stages where parallel speeches and events take place. They also include workshops, seminar sessions, and social events. Each is a rite on its own merits. Each follows its own set of rules, including rules that define who has access and on what terms. Each also performs an ordering magic similar to that of the keynote speech of Courtois but on a different scale. The rites in the main exhibition area are an important part of the whole. Facts and fetishes merge into “factishes” (Latour 2010) as the stands provide information, images, and objects that help us grasp the significance on what is on offer. These factishes reenchant the trade fair. They convey the magic of ledger (blockchain) technologies, data management consultants, or certifications from the British Standards Institute at the FET in London or AI at the AIfG in Geneva. Factishes are not to be questioned but to be believed. When I ask questions about exactly what difference blockchain technology would make to sustainable coffee production, how I should understand the import of this consultancy specifically, or precisely how the BSI standard would make a difference, answers are either invariably evasive or deflecting.<sup>11</sup> I am disturbing the magic work done by the factishes I am looking at.

Rites do not always work. Just as the shaman will not always heal, ensure passage, or bring forth rain, at the trade fair the magic of ministry may fail to create a community just as the factishes may be unsuccessful in conveying the magic of the things they are associated with. Sometimes visitors to a stand or an opening speech will leave unpersuaded. The talking

around and commenting on the various events and stands are part and parcel of the ordering ritual, a way of firming and durably inscribing the magic of the rites. This includes dismissing some representatives as unserious, ineffectual, charlatans, or impostors and the things they represent as useless or even harmful. Rather than make the untenable point that trade fair rites necessarily work their magic, I am making the more limited claim that they are indeed rites invoking magic. They are instances of “society casting spells on itself” (Taussig 2010, 136), spells of the capitalist neoliberal kind located at the core of the effervescent new spirit of capitalism.

## Affecting the Bodily Senses beyond Language

The rites at the trade fairs engage the body beyond language. The body is enacting the rites and the enactment anchors the magical neoliberal order deeply in the body. Like other ritual performances, trade fair rituals work with and on the body. Although this rarely involves the kind of dancing, dressing, masking, painting, paining, and inscribing central to the imaginary surrounding rituals, a close observation of trade fairs leaves little doubt about the centrality of the bodily senses. Trade fairs most definitely share “the most subtle and central quality of those actions we tend to call ritual . . . [namely] the primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment” (Bell 1998, 82; see also Collins 2014, 53–8). The fair indeed has traditionally meant noise, tumult, music, popular rejoicing, the world turned upside down. The senses are engaged. This is also true of economic rituals, including at the security, military, and technology trade fairs I look at here. Observed closely, these fairs are also replete with rites involving the embodied and affective.

The stands at security, military, and technology trade fairs are also full of little gifts for visitors, including, for example—as offered by the Mimecast<sup>12</sup> and Bitglass<sup>13</sup> stands—pens, blocks, usb sticks with information about the company, bottle openers, camera covers, and plastic balls for the beach (see figure 19.2). To follow Mauss and analyze the gift exchange around them could be the object of an essay in its own right. Here I just want to highlight the ways in which these little gifts appeal to the senses beyond language and indeed beyond vision. So, very schematically: Trade fairs have *taste*. Quality food is served in the VIP areas. Exhibitors often offer coffee, beer, drinks, pretzels, nuts, cookies, or sweets, such as the Mimecast licorice. Most visitors will not eat any of these; however, their presence flavors the product. Mints are the staple in tradefairs. Also Mimecast offers them. perhaps mints are so common because they speak to the *olfactory*? Perhaps these are an expression of the anxiety around bad breath in this talking and walking context of the trade fair? An expression of the “deodorizing trajectory” of Western culture that might eventually be abandoned to follow the trend and be replaced with an obsession “with experiencing smells intensely, from incense to herbal pot-pourris to perfume and aromatherapy,” as a way of generating authenticity, “a slice of the real” (Banes and Lepecki 2012, 35)?

Perhaps security and tech fairs will soon smell like labs, optic cables, or secured compounds. Certainly the many objects on display are there to create authenticity. They are to be lifted, examined, and *touched*, providing a feel of the real thing. Representatives invite those visiting a stand to pick up a product; they pat it or point to it when expounding on its qualities. In yet another instance of magic, exhibitors also tend to give the intangible and untouchable physical shape. The Hitachi bathtub duck “inspiring the next” is a case in





FIGURE 19.2. Bitglass stand (Detail) in *Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud*, Amsterdam 19–20 June 2019.

point. The little blue fluffy balls produced by Cyberark, marketing itself as “#1 in privileged access security” is another (figure 19.3). The balls were all over the stand, and the representative explained to me that they spent the first day of the fair tagging them to visitors. They stopped. The effort to touch or invoke touch amused the representatives. It annoyed the visitors. The discussions around the fluffy balls certainly fed into the buzzing sound of the trade fair, its *acoustic* appeal. Some stands leave their own trace. They may have headphones that allow you to watch a video and listen to the sound in isolation. More often, they will have a video with music and text, mostly discreetly tucked away in a corner of the stand, but sometimes very loudly covering the space and designed to attract visitors, as, for instance, the film that made up the entire display of ArmaInstruments at the Amsterdam FET.<sup>14</sup>

Trade fair rites, in sum, involve more than the “monstrous text organ” Western culture tends to posit at its center (Howes 2003, 21).<sup>15</sup> They engage other sensory faculties. In so doing they anchor the magic of these rites in the insides, in our bodies and in the parts of these that do not engage us in reflection. They connect directly to our affects, our emotions, perhaps also therefore making us part of the rite, and perhaps even transforming us through it. Perhaps the red Hitachi bathtub duck “inspiring the next” or the blue Cyberarch fluffy ball sticking to our clothes manages to bring our affective selves into the rite. Perhaps not. Perhaps they trigger a mimesis in which we are not only part of the magic rites of a ritual that enacts a neoliberal order but become those rituals in that we embody and mimic them. Perhaps we do so durably, also beyond the space of the trade fair (Mitchell and Bull 2015, 33).



FIGURE 19.3. Cyberark stand (Detail) in *Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud*, Amsterdam 19–20 June 2019.

The affordances of technical mediation ease such mimesis. Cameras, heat, and noise sensors generate visualizations that not only locate the visitor in the fair but merge the commodified order of the fair with the visitor, including me (figure 19.4). Whether or not the trade fair does become a mimetic experience, trade fair rites are designed to make it one. They contribute to a ritual that invokes and enacts the magical, sacred, and embodied. Acknowledging these aspects of the trade fair rites is a condition for grasping and grappling with the deep grip of the neoliberal ordering performed at them.

## THE POLITICS OF INSTITUTIONALIZING LIMINALITY AT TRADE FAIRS

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Can we say more about the politics of the ordering performed at the trade fair? More about the people, objects, or technologies empowered by it, more about the rules, norms, forms, and facts it conjures, and more about the kinds of values it enacts? Can we go beyond the observation already made that the trade fair is a ritual instituting an order based on disorder and indeterminacy, and that it is a magical, affective, and embodied order that engages beyond rational reasoning in language?

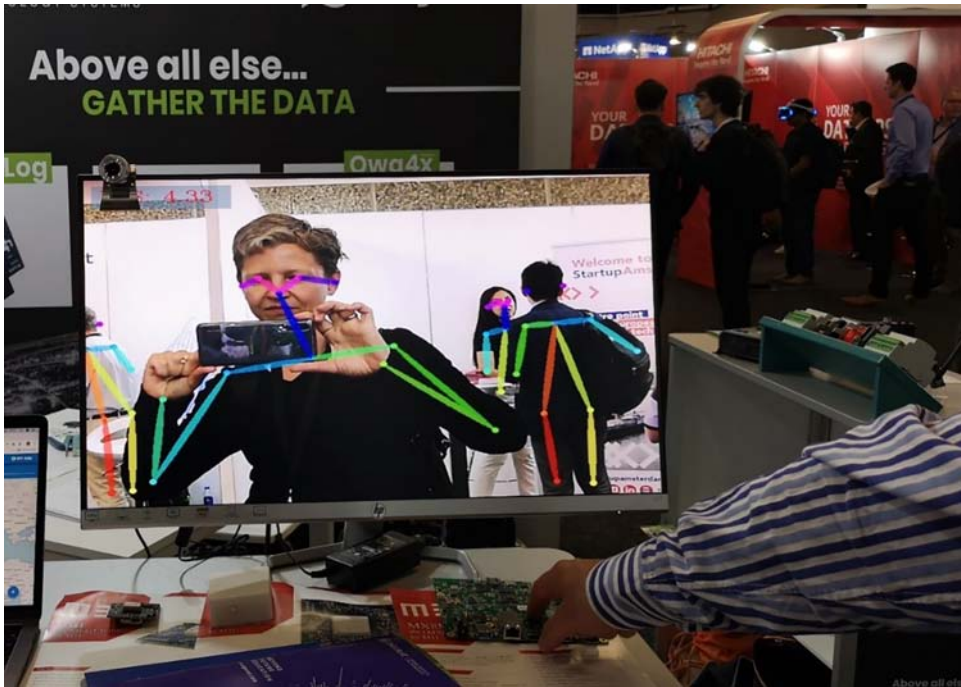


FIGURE 19.4. Mediated merging of visitor and the display in *Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity & Cloud*, Amsterdam 19–20 June 2019.

## Victor Turner's Hope

Trade fairs as just described are liminal spaces of sorts where order is transformed and renegotiated. The orders they enact are liminal orders in that they are uncertain, constantly transforming. But what is the politics of such liminality? For Victor Turner there was little doubt that liminality was the most interesting and creative aspect of rituals.<sup>16</sup> Initially he took an interest in it mainly as a heuristic device for understanding societal orders. It was a photographic negative of sorts. By looking at what was allowed or choreographed in the betwixt and between liminal space, one could, Turner thought, also observe the hierarchies, rules, taboos, and values in ordinary life that this space was detached from. Liminal spaces, as he puts it, are “antistructural breathing spaces for everything that cannot be captured by routines. They generate new models, often fantastic ones.... The antistructural liminality provided in the cores of ritual and aesthetic forms represents the reflexivity of the social process, wherein society becomes at once subject and direct object; it represents also its subjunctive mood, where suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities, and so forth, all become legitimate” (Turner 1977, vii). As the emphasis on the generative force of the liminal space as a site for reflexivity underscores, liminality also had another important role that became ever more prominent in Turner's work. It came to epitomize the possibility of imagining and enacting social change (Thomassen 2009).

For Turner, the creative potential of an “antistructural” and “antitemporal” liminal space was where hope for progressive politics, for the prospect that order could be renegotiated

but also, rather more strongly, reinvented and moved in a more progressive direction was located. Even more strongly, Turner believed that “institutionalized liminality” might make such progressive politics permanent, locating it at the heart of a specific form of community he termed *communitas* (Turner 1977, 145).

## Inscribing Commercial Forms of Liminal Politics

Trade fairs are rituals that institutionalize liminality. They institute an inherently indeterminate order. They are antistructural and set up to negotiate and transform the roles, rules, and values of society. Central to this process is the performance of magic and embodied rites that rely on what one might, with Turner, term a pedagogics of liminality. However, the politics of these trade fair rituals bear little resemblance to the politics Turner hoped the institutionalization of liminality would bring.

Nurturing a commercial order based on competition presupposes an openness about the rules and limits of the (un)acceptable. New products and services cannot emerge and gain significance if rules, regulations, and ethical conceptions are too tight. Bureaucratic red tape and the absence of positive, plural imaginations are therefore negative reference points. Even more striking is the persuasion that rules should be soft, malleable, and attuned to process. This seems to be the commonsense truth among those interested in, e.g., the (ethical or legal) rules governing, e.g., hacking and penetration, the use of ledger technologies or automated management. As the representative of one of the biggest contemporary consulting companies explained to me, only through a process orientation is it possible to retain context sensitivity and avoid “blueprints that backfire.”<sup>17</sup> The intention is for rules to be adjustable to the context. Everyone, including small companies, needs to be able to adjust and change them to be able to work with them in the markets. Rules must of course exist, but they have to remain malleable, subject to revision to keep any hierarchical and exclusionary effect in check.

Despite this ostensible attachment to nonhierarchical and egalitarian openness, its practice at the market trade fair is never entirely persuasive. Traces of hierarchy and structure are pervasive. The Microsoft stand might be the smallest, but it still attracts a constant flow of visitors. Its speech may be set at one of the side stages, but it still draws a far bigger audience than most of the other speeches.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the differences in standing and position of participants and exhibitors constantly shines through in innumerable details, such as the kind of badge they wear, their access to the VIP areas, the flagging of their sponsorship level, the design of the stands, the way they dress, and their approach to other participants. Similarly, rules are not indefinitely malleable, nonhierarchical, and open. The law matters. Finally, amid creativity, innovation, and imagination, conventional and hierarchical values make their appearance. They are not contestable, negotiable, redesignable—at least in the specific context of their appearance. Militarized masculinity, solidarity with the unit or the profession, and nationalism are as common reference points among organizations linked to the security professions as are efficiency, competitiveness, ambition, and profitability among those with roots in financial risk analysis. Most significant, the market itself stands untouched.

These hierarchies of actors, rules, and values, and most centrally the attachment to market logics, are neither crystal clear nor universally agreed upon. Specific aspects of markets can

be questioned. However, they leave pervasive traces of structure in the antistructural space of the trade fair. They sap the tempting amnesia that relegates the hierarchy and inequality underpinning commercial orders to oblivion. Overlooked—not invisible—hierarchy and inequality therefore continue to throw a long shadow over the emphasis on potential and possibility, lending ambivalence to the ordering performances in trade fairs. This ambivalence wreaks havoc with Turner's hope. Despite institutionalizing a liminality of sorts, the trade fairs are not progressive in the egalitarian way he had envisaged. They are tournaments of values conservatively skewed to reenact the commercial order. The participants, the rules and values of the fields they are concerned with are equal—but then they also are not. They can be shifted, redesigned, and reinvented—but within limits. The antistructural space of the trade fairs bears the imprint of structures that impose themselves, however hard those in the space strive to ignore, forget, or obscure them.

## CONCLUSION: BUILDING IN INEGALITARIAN INSTABILITY

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If the argument in this chapter is correct, trade fairs have become a neoliberal ordering ritual of sorts. Opening conversations about their politics, and more specifically about the institutionalization of liminality, is therefore crucial. So is building alliances to work with this politics. The ambivalence surrounding this politics does little to challenge, let alone change, its contribution to a hierarchical and ultimately conservative order. Nor does it diminish the importance of the institutionalization of liminality in masking the politics. The ordering rituals designed to frame disorder, to encourage a never-ending process of emergence and transformation makes it too easy to overlook the stickiness of structure, context, language, and things. Instead the rites that confirm and enact the embodied, affective magic of this order deepen its grip. They place it beyond language by involving the wider sense-making and mimetic abilities of those involved. The rituals and rites of the trade fairs are also always already and continuously digitally mediated. Invitations and registration are online. The trade fair space and the rites in it are mediated. The networked community (of shifting nature with porous boundaries) is reproduced through a scanning of badges and an avalanche of follow-up communications. The neoliberal ordering rituals, the rites associated with them, and their substantive politics are part of what we with Donatella Della Ratta (2018) might term the *onlife* of contemporary politics. The trade fair rituals deepen the hierarchical grip of neoliberal orderings by anchoring them in magic and bodily affect and in the affordance of technological mediations that extend them to the onlife. One might think of these rituals as formatting instability and inequality into the dense sociobiological unruly technical infrastructural maze underpinning the neoliberal order.

In this chapter, I have discussed the role of trade fair rituals as a form of governance, drawing analogies between commercial technology fairs and the ITU yearly AI for Good Summit. The ITU is an international organization, not a company. The analogy has severed to underscore that trade fairs, or trade fair-like rituals, are occupying an ever more central role in governance, including governance involving public institutions such as the ITU. The Davos World Economic Forum is an obvious case in point. So are the Munich Security



Conference and the UN Climate Change Conferences. Even the academic conferences governing the ‘market for ideas’ increasingly take the form of the trade fair rituals, as is perhaps most evident in the case of the Academic Economic Association but true more generally. Perhaps most disconcerting, initiatives expressly intent on countering neoliberal governance—such as social fora or hacking events—have come to resemble trade fairs. We are witnessing a trade-fairization of governance. Tending to the politics of this process is consequently crucial. This chapter has done precisely this, showing that trade fairs are ordering rituals of sorts that stabilize inegalitarian instability, making them part of our political infrastructure. However, tending to the politics of trade-fairization is an ongoing project (as is the neoliberal one). Most of the work lies ahead. This chapter is an invitation to take this work further by exploring the politics of performance in the context of trade fairs.

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## NOTES

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1. State Studio, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://state-studio.com/>, emphases and capitalization in the original.
2. AI for Good Global Summit emphases and capitalization in the original.
3. In this chapter I draw mainly on fieldwork done in the SCTX (Security and Counter Terror Expo, London, March 6–7, 2018) and in the FET (Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data, London, April 25–6, 2019, and Amsterdam June 19–20, 2019) and in the AIfG (Geneva, May 28–31, 2019).
4. XPrize, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://www.xprize.org/>, emphases and capitalization in the original.
5. Based on my fieldwork at The Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data, London, April 25–6, 2019; AI for Good Global Summit, Geneva, May 28–31, 2019.
6. For an introduction to the company, see <https://www.hitachi.com/>, accessed July 8, 2019.
7. Factom, accessed July 8, 2019, <https://www.factom.com/>.
8. Based on my fieldwork at The Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data, Amsterdam, June 19–20, 2019.
9. Jean-Philippe Courtois, Executive VP and President, Microsoft Global Sales, Marketing and Operations from Microsoft.
10. Based on my fieldwork at AI for Good Global Summit, Geneva, May 28–31, 2019.
11. Fieldwork, The Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data, London, April 25–6, 2019.
12. Mimecast, accessed July 14, 2019, <https://www.mimecast.com/>.
13. Bitglass, accessed July 14, 2019, <https://www.bitglass.com/>.
14. ArmaInstruments, accessed July 14, 2019, <https://armainstruments.com/>; fieldwork, The Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data, Amsterdam, June 19–20, 2019.
15. Obviously sense-making and affect are central not only to trade fairs but to economic action and agency more generally, as argued many times including, for example by Bourdieu (2005) for the housing markets in France and Appadurai (2015) for banking.
16. Turner’s interest in liminality, as is well known, derived from his interest in Van Gennep’s work dividing rites of passage into different stages, including the detachment from society,



the liminal betwixt and between, and the reinsertion into society of those transiting from one state of being to another.

17. Fieldwork, *The Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data*, London, April 25–6, 2019.
18. Fieldwork, *The Future of Enterprise Technology: IoT Tech, Blockchain, CyberSecurity&Cloud, AI & Big Data*, Amsterdam, June 19–20, 2019.

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