

The Culture of Competition in Modern Liberal Societies¹⁾

JONATHAN HEARN

Introduction

This talk provides an overview of a developing research project on the transformation of the concept of competition, and its increasing institutionalisation, in the historical formation of modern liberal culture. I argue that competition is a core cultural concept that is crucial in organising and legitimating power relations in liberal forms of society. It facilitates authoritative allocations of power and rewards in a form of society that is typically suspicious of authority, and it does this across multiple domains: economics, politics, science, the arts, and so on. Particularly telling here, is the way competition exhibits many of the key features of 'ritual' typically associated with religion. It dramatizes core cultural values, performatively transforms the social roles of participants, inculcates community, and authorises outcomes by linking them to an underlying cosmological order. I present competition as a key to the cultural analysis of liberal society.

I. Overview of the project

This talk comes out of a large on going research project on the nature of competition and its relationship to modern, liberal forms of society. That project seeks to substantiate the thesis that competition is basic to how distributions of power are legitimated in such societies. The research was launched last year (2013-14) with the support of an *Independent Social Research Foundation* (ISRF) Mid-Career Fellowship. I see it as a long-term,

1) This article is based on the text of a talk given to the Warwick Sociology Seminar, at the University of Warwick in the UK, on 25 February 2015.

multidimensional research agenda that will continue for many years.

At its most ambitious the project seeks to rethink the entire narrative of modernisation by arguing that a deep transformation in the conceptualisation and institutionalisation of competition underlies the emergence of modern capitalism, democracy, science, and relatively secular and liberal belief systems generally. That transformation involves a shift from the awareness of the bare fact of rivalry and competition as an aspect of social life, to a much more conscious and reflexive attitude towards competition that sees it as a process that can be deliberately harnessed and put to use across an array of institutional domains (again, economic, political, scientific, etc.). This transformation happens for several reasons: first, the erosion and weakening of traditional structures of authority and legitimacy based on religion, monarchy, and hereditary rule; second, the growing strength of more purely economic actors; and third, the growth of simultaneously mass- and individual-based democratic politics, which brings with it new opportunities for the social organisation of rule. Together these make necessary new means of authorising and legitimising the allocation of power and resources. Formalised, reflexive competition provides a way of doing this that appears to be to be rooted in nature, even while it is highly artificial and socially constructed.

A starting point of this project, and a large part of the ISRF fellowship work, has been to examine the history of the concept (in English), by reconstructing lexical and semantic changes in the word since about 1700 (Koselleck 1989, Pierson 2013). This was done through an historical survey of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and other texts (Hearn n.d.). The aim here is to build a 'spine' to help anchor the larger socio-historical analysis. Along the same lines has been the beginning of on-going studies of two key figures whose work appears to have differently influenced the evolution of the concept: Adam Smith and Charles Darwin. In a nutshell, I argue that the idea of competition, while present, is not as central to Smith's core complex of ideas as many economists subsequently have argued (e.g. Stigler 1957). On the other hand, Darwin's theory of evolution does make competition central to its explanatory framework. These interpretations correspond to

the lexical survey study, which suggested that our contemporary language of competition doesn't really coalesce out of an earlier, looser language of 'rivalry', until around the mid-nineteenth century.

Another aim of the wider project, begun under the fellowship but still to be further developed, is to foster greater interdisciplinary dialogue about the concept today, especially in the social and life sciences. (A small workshop held in the Scottish Graduate School Doctoral Training Centre summer school 2014, brought together an interdisciplinary group for this purpose.) In my view the historical reconstruction of the history of the idea should be complimented by current explorations of the diverse uses of the concept, especially in fields such as economics, politics, international relations, education, ecology, and biological evolution. I am also interested in the relative marginality of the concept, as a tool of social analysis, in sociology; although it has more presence in fields such as historical comparativism, and social evolutionary theories, as exemplified by Tilly (1975) and Runciman (2009) respectively. To the degree that the sciences, social and otherwise, and popular common sense, use the concept of competition to make sense of the world, it behoves us to scrutinise our own role in that process.

But today I want to focus on the idea that competition is a kind of 'key' to the analysis of liberal culture. This will involve defining what I mean by 'culture'. I then want to zero in on what I think is a fruitful line of analysis within this frame, which is to examine modern, liberal competition through the lens of ritual and theories of ritual, as a way of analysing in more detail the way competition helps to legitimate power in such societies.

II. Competition as a key component of a 'culture'

Let me begin this part by clarifying my somewhat eccentric conception of 'culture'. It has become conventional, partly due to the historical institutional differentiation of sociology and anthropology (Kroeber and Parsons 1958) and partly due to the strong influence of figures such as Clifford Geertz (1973), to treat 'culture' as a concept closely akin to 'ideology', primarily a matter of shared symbols and meanings, and somehow distinct from

organisations, institutions, and social relations generally conceived in more materialist and less idealist terms. My own use of the culture concept harks back to older, frankly less theorised conventions in anthropology, when it was used more as a covering term for all aspects—material, organisational, ideational—of a ‘way of life’. I think of the concept of culture as directing attention to the tendency towards a degree of cohesion and congruence across the entire range of social phenomenon, not to an ideational ‘layer’. For me it is more akin to Weber’s notion of ‘elective affinity’ (e.g. 1978: 1208) or the general premise of Marx’s ‘mode of production’ concept (1996[1859]: 159-61), that holds that there will be reinforcing (but also contradictory) relations between such disparate things as the material organisation of production, institutions of law and government, philosophy, aesthetics, and so on.

So, when I say that competition is a key component of modern liberal culture, I mean to emphasise the way it connects, as a social form, the organisation of economic and political activity, as well as activities more specifically tied to the production of knowledge, opinion and belief. In his classic study of the Nuer (1969[1940]), the British social anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard declared ‘*cherchez la vache*’ (‘look for the cow’) (p.16), by which he meant that cattle were so central to the way of life of this pastoral people, that their presence permeated all aspects of life—inter-group relations, supernatural authority, naming children, the reckoning of the seasons, and so on. In a similar way I am saying ‘*cherchez le competition*’, because it provides not just a feature of modern liberal society, but one of its key symbols and organising principles. For purposes of presentation, I will analyse such societies into three main domains: economic, political, and a less easily labelled domain of ‘belief making’, by which I mean to encompass diverse activities associated with the production of knowledge, opinion, and belief (e.g. science, the arts, news media, religious and other social purpose-oriented institutions). What I have in mind here overlaps with, but also extends beyond, what is sometimes meant by ‘civil society’, especially as the primary site for opinion formation (Bobbio 1989; Hall and Trentman 2005).

I should add that these three ‘domains’ are dissimilar, and together

form a distinctive 'shape'. I want to emphasise that liberal societies have at their institutional core twinned and mutually reinforcing and legitimating clusters of organisations oriented to politics and economics. The state monopolises and distributes administrative power to a host of more local and para-governmental organisation, filtering into a field of voluntary sector and civil society organisations. A parallel 'pillar' of organisations with major corporations (TNCs, MNCs) and financial institutions at their heart, surrounded by an array of medium and smaller firms, and business-oriented associations, stands alongside the political pillar. Central banks function as intermediate, linchpin organisations. The liberal state justifies itself by taking care of the capitalist market economy, providing for its smooth functioning, and compensating for its limitations. For their part, the institutions of the economic domain support the state by generating the wealth necessary for taxation, and managing much of the routine provisioning of the population, with goods, services, and crucially, employment. Despite deep antagonisms between these domains, they need each other. The third domain of 'belief-making' is much more diffuse than these other two, though it of course articulates with them in many ways. Key institutional underpinnings in this domain are education and especially universities as centres of science, learning and research; the news and other media; high and popular arts institutions and industries, understood broadly to include such things as entertainment and even sports; and religious and other moral-worldview generating organisations. An important indication of the ambiguous positioning of this 'domain' between and around the other two 'pillars', is the way in which some of the organisations in it are constituted more as income generating firms within an industry, and others are constituted more as public social goods with associated key institutions with claims on public support. But all are involved in the production of knowledge, opinion, taste and belief (see Hearn 2012, ch 7, for elaboration of this general model).

A basic premise of my argument is that as the competitive principle bedded down and became more routinized in each domain of activity, there was a sharpening and codifying of three basic components of formalised

competitive activity: (1) the 'competitors', (2) the 'rewards', and (3) the 'rules of the game'. The formation of liberal, capitalist, democratic society as we know it today involves the coalescence of these key features in these three different domains.

Economy. The characteristic competing unit of the capitalist economy is the company or firm. From the 18th century to the present this form has coalesced out of looser family-based operations and alliances of elites around specific wealth seeking ventures. The codification of the joint-stock format bolstered by limited liability, and the definition of companies as legal persons has been crucial in consolidating this form (Micklethwaite and Wooldridge 2005, Gomory and Sylla 2013). Correspondingly, the rewards that companies characteristically compete for have been codified, shifting from opportunities to capture (often through imperial and colonial means) resources for sale and profit, to much more precise competitions over shareholder investment and markets/buyers (often legally defined). And the competition between units over rewards is now much more tightly constituted, by law and regulation controlling the basic means of business, such as stable currencies and interest rates, etc., and the basic 'rules of the game' in terms of the regulation of business practices and emergence of 'competition law' itself, which is the clearest demonstration of the formalisation and institutionalisation of competition as a governing economic principle.

Politics. The emergence of modern democratic politics based on political parties and competition for public offices runs in striking parallel to the formalisation of economic competition. The idea of democracy in the 18th century was broad and multivalent. How to actually 'do it' was unclear and disputed. It was only under force of circumstance, initially in the newly independent American colonies, that the first modern party system began to develop, almost by accident, crystallising into a system in which political parties (units) compete over goals (offices) within rules (election law). In the absence of an unproblematic 'general will' (Rousseau 1962[1762]) some system had to take shape for allocating the democratic power of public authority. Political offices were formalised and detached from

patronage to become objects of competition (Wood 1991: 57-77), political parties developed out of factions to form the primary contending units of democracy (Hofstadter 1972, Schattschneider 1942), and again, law is called on to regulate the process, making election reform perennial to the political landscape.²⁾

To repeat, in keeping with the 'twin pillars' image offered above, I see the parallels in formal development of the economic and political domains outlined here as evidence of their complex interdependence, as part of a wider system underpinned by deep competitive principles. As also indicated above, the story for our third domain, 'belief-making', is by its nature much looser and messier.

Belief-Making (Civil Society). In this domain there is an important difference. This is where pluralistic liberal society manages evolving contention over opinions and beliefs. But what distinguishes this domain is the fragmentation of goals, because unlike the limited goods of profit and political office, beliefs and opinions can proliferate to meet demands, and thus in many cases so can the units competing to meet those demands. Within any of the more specific fields adumbrated above—news media, higher education, religious organisations, entertainments and arts industries, and so on—one again finds characteristic units competing over rewards (profits and market share, but also reputation, prestige, and influence). But central to success in this domain is the ability to dominate, or at least hold a place, in the formation of opinion, taste, knowledge and belief, not just to economically reproduce organisations.

The composition of civil society has changed since the 18th century, with secularisation and the expansion of institutions of science, education and communication. The overall effect is a certain vibrancy and innovativeness in the realm of ideas. However, competition over diverse belief in liberal society also creates a confusing abundance, and is not as susceptible to

2) I am of course leaving aside on this occasion the wider question of competition among states in the geopolitical arena (see Hall 1996, Cerny 2010, Spruyt 1994), which is complexly related to the monopolization of force by the modern state, eliminating or at least reducing internal competition over the means of violence.

regulation as markets or elections. Finally, to anticipate the next section, this is the arena in which some of the most purely symbolic competition rituals take place, as in entertainment and sport, providing a kind of abstracted reflection and oblique commentary on competition as a core cultural principle.

Our own academic practice in the social sciences and humanities is a case in point. On one level competition operates between institutions such as universities and academic disciplines, through vehicles such as the Research Excellence Framework in the UK. And at this level the drivers are more like those that characterise the economic domain of competing companies. Thus the increasingly corporate form of our universities. And as individuals and teams competing for funding and accolades we are somehow complicit in this process. But on another level, we as scholars compete with each other, to advance interpretations, theories, approaches, and so on, that is, to have a selecting effect on the range of ideas in our fields (cf. Hull 1988, Collins 1998). The intellectual health of our academic practice requires some degree of competition among contending ideas, no matter how respectful and civil. This duality, between the organisations that house belief-shaping practices but must basically compete economically, and the more direct competition over 'ideas' by the actors housed in those organisations, runs throughout this domain.

Across all these domains of activity, conventions of competition provide an underlying similarity of form and meaning, while also legitimating domain-specific allocations of power and rewards. These allocations are achieved much of the time through highly formalised, rule-governed procedures that show many of the features of ritual, as found in religion, and frequently highlighted in anthropological studies. The rest of this talk explores this ritual dimension of competition.

III. Competition as ritual

I start by quickly reviewing some of the widely recognised formal aspects of ritual and relating these to competition. I then survey some key works and ideas in the theory of ritual. Then the discussion will develop themes

that have emerged, in regard to competition as ritual.

Definitions of ritual of course vary. But certain elements or properties are widely recognised as basic to the idiom (see Bell 1997: 138-170, Rappaport 1999). To wit:

- *Formalism*. Rituals are largely rule-governed, albeit with some limited scope for spontaneity. A ritual has to be a set of acts that can be repeated according to a basic 'liturgical' template.
- *Expertise*. Very often there are 'ritual specialist' with privileged knowledge about the proper conduct and efficacy of rituals. Sometimes they alone are qualified to conduct a ritual. But this especially applies to larger scale or more communal rituals. There are also personal or household rituals that any member of an observing community is qualified and even obliged to conduct.
- *'Separation'*. This one is tricky. Very often ritual is seen as something by definition 'set apart' from daily life, or at least intervening in and interrupting the normal flow of events (especially in the Durkheimian tradition as we will see in a moment). This is part of what marks the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. A lot hangs on how we understand this relationship, and I will come back to this.
- *Social reference*. Rituals, in highly abstracted and symbolised ways, tend to refer to the wider societies in which they operate, enacting dominant myths, ideas and beliefs. They dramatise relations of authority, and authorise established social roles. In the sub-category Van Gennep (1960) called 'rites of passage', they manage key social transitions (birth, maturation, death).
- *Instrumentalism/performativity*. Following on from the previous, rites of passage are a prime example of rituals that don't just reflect aspects of society, but enact them. Rituals render people as married, as adults, as new members of communities. They make it so. Some rituals are more purely 'performance', but many are 'performative' in the sense associated with J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). Other kinds of rituals are instrumental as well, such as curing rituals that

aim to heal, or divinations that seek to predict future events, but without the aspect manifestly effecting role changes.

I could go on, but these are some of the main widely recognised features of ritual. Now competition, in the most general sense of rivalry over limited goods, extends well beyond this set of formal features. But in its more limited sense, as a 'count noun', 'competitions', as relatively bounded and specific events, bear striking resemblances to this general description. They are by definition 'rule-governed'. They are often moderated or adjudicated by appropriate 'experts'. The distinction just made between the general and specific sense of competition exemplifies my point about 'separation'. Major competition events are often highly sequestered, hemmed in by rules and oversight, engaged in with an attitude of reverence. But many others are much smaller scale and more routine, bleeding out into the realm of the trivial. Particularly in their most purely symbolic forms, associated especially with sports and entertainment, competitions are commonly viewed as prime exemplifications of human drama, the competitors' struggles with each other and themselves summing up certain human universals. At the same time these encode core norms, values and narratives of the societies in which they take place. Finally, such competitions 'make things happen'. Their outcomes are not merely symbolic. Through the performance of the ritual people are rendered as winners or losers, ranked in consequential hierarchies, granted or denied access to resources, opportunities and statuses. *Competitions* exhibit the key features of ritual.

Now for some theory. Durkheim (1965) looms large in the tradition of theory about ritual and religion, and for him ritual was intimately associated with religion. As already indicated, he placed great emphasis on the distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', arguing that the key function of ritual was to demarcate certain objects as sacred, famously the 'totem' surrounded by taboos that could be broken by members of the community at certain ritual moments, thus intensifying their communal bonds in a act of shared and sanctioned transgression. The psychic and emotional 'effervescence' generated by the ritual has two key effects for

Durkheim. It consolidates social fellow-feeling, strengthening communal bonds. At the same time, through acts of collective submission (to the totem/God), the authority of shared social norms is affirmed. Much like Freud's (1938) account of the primal horde's slaying of the father, and despite the presence of real aboriginal ethnographic evidence, there is a high degree of mythopoesis in Durkheim's account. I would argue that his anxieties about the fragmenting and anomic effects of complex modern industrial society, with a very elaborated division of labour, led him to over-invest his investigations of religion and ritual with the search for a remedy to modern losses of solidarity and authority. Nonetheless, I also think his basic insight that authority had become unmoored in modern society, and this is problematic, was acute. He had the right question, if not an adequate answer.

A next wave of theorising about ritual is associated with Max Gluckman (1954) and Victor Turner (1977). Both were part of the trend to qualify structural and functionalist theorising by focussing more on questions of social conflict, although their approaches to ritual tended to show precisely how rituals helped societies to cope with and process conflict. Gluckman's notion of 'rituals of rebellion' showed how ritual dramatisations of structural social conflicts could, in effect, 'blow off steam', acknowledging while also containing such conflicts. Turner's development of the ideas of Van Gennep on rites of passage argued that the structures of ritual enclosed moments of 'liminality' or 'anti-structure' (in Van Gennep, the period of transition within the ritual from one social status to another) in which social hierarchies were levelled and community affirmed. Again, this is in contrast to the normal, more stratified structures of daily life outside the ritual process.

The most striking recent attempt to return to the concept of ritual in sociology has been Randall Collins' (2004) argument for the analysis of 'ritual interaction chains'. Collins attempts a synthesis of the sociologies of Durkheim and Erving Goffman. He largely accepts Durkheim's argument about collective effervescence and the intensification of social bonds through heightened emotion. But he follows Goffman (1967) in locating

ritual in the small, rule/norm governed social interactions of daily life. He sees this as solving a certain weakness in Durkheim's approach, with its emphasis on the holism of society, and the idea that major rituals serve the solidarity of society as a whole. Like most sociologists today, Collins is sceptical about overly bounded and integrated conceptions of society. Thus by using Goffman to link ritual to small-scale social interactions, the implication is that there are many cross-cutting networks of ritually intensified social bonds, which can be juxtaposed and in conflict with one another. His emphasis on 'chains' of rituals, that is the recurrence of the form within social networks, also allows him to get away from the image of the single 'big event' ritual, the force of these rituals being located rather in the 'sinews' of interaction. Thus he is able to preserve his long association with conflict theory (1975) while also returning to Durkheim's now amended functionalism. While I share Collins's scepticism about social holism, my main reservation about Collins' approach is that his preoccupation with the intensification of emotional bonds causes him to lose sight of that other aspect of ritual that concerned Durkheim, the creation of authority. The substance of this objection will hopefully become clearer as I proceed.

Before proceeding, because it is especially relevant to my concerns with the connections between ritual, competition, authority, and legitimacy, I also want to note that there is a specific subfield of the study of 'political ritual' (Kertzer 1988). But I also want to differentiate my perspective. A prime example here is Clifford Geertz's (1980) treatment of the 'theater state' of nineteenth-century Java as an endless train of public ritual and ceremony designed to symbolise and dramatise royal power and authority to subjects across the domain. Similarly the historian George Mosse (1975) has examined the architectural monuments and public festivals of the Third Reich as parts of a 'secular religion' cultivating a particular aesthetic that complemented Nazi power and racist ideology. At the less grandiose and more subterranean level, Abner Cohen's work has looked at the ritual and symbolic creation of political community among elites and secret societies (1974, 1981). These are characteristic examples. The study of political ritual tends to operate in a Durkheimian mode that emphasises either the

overwhelming symbolic force of ritual spectacle or the intensification of the social bonds of the political community, or both. I wouldn't deny that both these things happen, but I question whether this adequately comprehends the way rituals operate in the instantiation of power relations. I suspect it is often more mundane and diffuse than this tends to suggest, or at least stress. For the rest of this section I elaborate on themes that have arisen in it so far.

From Commensality to Competition. Very simply, across the vast range of instances and types of ritual that populate the writings of anthropology and history, it is striking how often rituals involve feasting, the sharing of meals, the distribution of food. From the Christian Eucharist, itself modelled on earlier tribal rites of slaughter and sacrifice (Hubert and Mauss 1964), to the American national-secular ritual of the Thanksgiving meal, commensality is a mainstay of ritual action. Among relatively acephalous societies (e.g. the chiefdoms and 'big man' societies of anthropology and archaeology) ritual feasting is usually central to annual cycles (e.g. Rappaport 1968), and it is also prominent in ancient agrarian states. And feasting rituals obviously have their corollary in obverse rituals of fasting, which are also about food and its distribution (Bell 1997: 120-28). The symbolically minded may be inclined to see in this deep connection between food and ritual evidence of the representation of collectivity through the sharing (or abjuring) of a common substance, and that surely is part of the story. But it is also important to remember that in such societies, food is not just a symbol, but the most fundamental and essential resource, that sometimes becomes very scarce. As in Laswell's famous definition of politics, rituals of commensality are about 'who gets what, when, how' (1958[1936]). And such rituals have normally sat within wider norms about proper allocations of food, usually regulated by combinations of kin relations, friendship, and alliance, that govern more mundane distributions of food as well. My wider point here is that such rituals are not specific to any society or culture, but rather a basic type that is broadly found across all societies, from foraging bands to ancient states, in which food production is central to livelihoods.

Now with modern societies this has been changing. Particularly in the more 'mature' capitalist economies, with liberal democracies, a dwindling

portion of the population is directly involved in food production, and food by and large has become so cheap that is routinely wasted on a massive scale. There is good reason to suspect that the force of the commensal ritual is fading in this context as well, as the relationship to food becomes more individualised, and less governed by redistributive powers. So what I have to say here about the rising importance and ritualization of competition needs to be understood in this context. Not as something cropping up here and there, only recently intensified under 'neoliberalism', but as part of a slow epochal shift from agrarian to industrial-capitalist societies. Where once we were bound together by our access, or lack of it, to food, now we are much more bound together, within various distinct institutional contexts, by our participation in various rule-governed competitive events. Correspondingly, competition rituals are less tied to annual cycles, which affected work patterns and food availability for much of human history. This delinking may also make competition rituals seem more mundane, as occasional responses to specific circumstances. Nonetheless, many major competition rituals are held cyclically despite this disconnection, particularly in politics and sports. Moreover, against those who would say that ritual is characteristically a feature of 'traditional', 'pre-modern' societies, one that has been in decline in the modern world, and that signals the 'survival' of older practices where it does exist, I argue that quite the contrary, ritual is alive and well, especially in the form of competition rituals that are especially suited to secular, market-driven, democratic forms of society (cf. Douglas 1973).

Closure versus Complexity. I've indicated my doubts about the paradigmatic Durkheimian model of the totemic ritual that intensifies social solidarity by separating objects of worship and marking them off as sacred rather than profane. As Collins argues, it is difficult to see how such a ritual could have effect beyond a relatively isolated and small-scale society. But it also seems to me that part of what gives these highly sacralised rituals their effect is the way they are connected to ever more modest and mundane rituals, which may draw on the same cognitive, emotional and symbolic languages, but precisely are not cut off from daily life. The Aztec empire is

a case in point. People are often aware of the major ritual of human sacrifice, usually involving war captives, and premised on a kind of offering to the gods to preserve ecological balance. But this ritual sat within a complex of beliefs about historical cycles, propitious and unlucky days, and a routine of household rituals of 'auto-sacrifice', involving minor piercing of one's own flesh to draw small amount of blood in offering. In other words, the 'big' ritual gets its force from being connected to, not separate from, the 'small' ritual. Most religions exhibit this set of linkages from exceptional to routine rituals, from Catholic mass to handling a rosary, from the hajj to daily prayers, or in a secular and competitive context, from general to local council elections. It is the chain of resemblance and association, not the uniqueness, which gives it force and presence. When we investigate ritual, if we move our focus from a fascination with certain large-scale central ceremonies, to a wider social view, we always find a vast complex of ritual activities, running from the high and mighty to the low and mundane. Ultimately it is this pervasive social complex and how it operates, rather than the power of any individual ritual, that needs to be understood (this is a point of agreement between myself and Collins 2004). This connects back to my point in the previous section. The significance of competition lies in the way it is replicated as a ritual form across diverse domains, and from 'high' to 'low' within those domains.

Power/Authority/Legitimacy. Lastly in this section I want to focus on how ritual relates to the making of power, authority and legitimacy. First, competition rituals symbolise power and authority, but at the same time they enact these as well. To take one particularly clear example, a court case in which contending legal teams compete to convince a judge and jury of the guilt or innocence of parties, is, as a whole, a public representation of the authority of the state, the legal system, and the judge and jury as vested authorities in this context. The ritual, with its solemnity and ceremony, performs legitimated power structures for a general audience. But at the same time, enforceable power and authority is being executed, in a specific binding legal decision that may be either sanction and punishment, or vindication. So again, it is for this reason that I am wary of approaches to

ritual that concentrate on the aspect of meaning and symbol, as important as these are, to the neglect the instrumentality of ritual in enacting power. This is a particularly vivid example. However, I would argue that it highlights something that is generally true of competition and ritual, and that affects its efficacy across the high to low spectrum I have suggested above. Many things that I would call 'low key' competition rituals—applications for jobs or university places, bids for contracts or property purchases—operate primarily at the routine instrumental enactment end of the spectrum. The participants probably have little explicit sense of the 'rituality' of these events. But by their similarity of form, and by taking place within a society replete with more 'high key' rituals across multiple institutional domains, these are bound into a wider ritual complex. They are both rendered very normal, and associated with the quasi-sacred.

Second, along the same line, just as religious ritual asserts the this-worldly efficacy of other-worldly power, creating a bridge between sacred power and the secular world, competition as ritual appears to take general, trans-human, natural principles and apply them to the human-made, artificial world. So while a similar bridge is being made to an 'outside', transcendental source of authority, in religious ritual that outside source is supernatural, whereas in secular competition rituals, that source is what we might call 'hyper-natural'. In modern, liberal, pluralistic society there is a wide recognition and acknowledgement of the absence of a common understanding of ultimate sources of authority. People are entitled to their own beliefs, or the beliefs of their own group, as long as these don't lead to untenable conflict. The role once played by divine authority seeks supplement, from other, more modern sources of authority; and science and its command of 'nature' is crucial in this regard. This points towards an involved discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper. Put simply, competition is widely understood as rooted in 'nature', and it is legitimated especially by two major fields of 'science'. Competition is a central (though far from the only) concept for those biological sciences concerned with ecology and evolution. It is at the heart of Darwin's theory. It is also central for the discipline of economics, which however 'dismal', also tends

to hold pride of place among the social sciences, as somehow supremely relevant to how the world works. And of course there is conceptual traffic and borrowing between these disciplines (e.g. Frank 2011). Politics and international relations might come next if we were ranking disciplines by the centrality of competition to their thinking, and the concept of course is generally present in the social sciences. But the concept is most highly elaborated in evolutionary biology, economics, and political science, a combination that conceptually links the study of biological nature to the studies of the twinned institutional cores of liberal society discussed above: economy and politics.

If this general line of argument has validity, one might expect one outcome to be that certain social scientists—economists—would find themselves structurally thrust into institutional roles that once were dominated by religious authorities, as the constant companions and validators of secular authority in the past. And indeed, the modern liberal state's legitimacy rests particularly on its ability to manage and negotiate the intractable natural forces of 'the economy', and economists become something like the high (and low) priests, negotiating access to higher economic truths. The tendency of the discipline in recent decades towards highly arcane and abstract theory and modelling, which many, including economists, claim has limited correspondence to processes in the real world, bears striking resemblance to the high theologies of earlier systems, as in the European middle ages, that relied on a sacred-secular dualism for the legitimation of authority. As noted above, one of the key elements of ritual is expertise, and modern society has generated new class of experts to advise on the proper conduct and efficacy of competition as economics, and this is partly done by formalising and ritualising its performance.

To wind up this last section, I want to make one further point about how ritual helps blur the boundary between the artificial and natural worlds (see Hearn 2014). One way we could classify competition rituals is by how, exactly, they achieve their outcomes. How is the contention between competitors resolved? The answer is that the methods are mixed, but in an interesting way. At one end we find rituals in which the judgement of

experts is central to the decision, such as the panel of judges in a literary competition. The outcome relies on their act of informed judgement, and thus the genuineness of their expertise, and incorruptibility of their judgements is crucial to the ritual. At the other end there are outcomes that are arrived at simply through the contest itself. This is particularly characteristic of sporting events, where the winner is the 'first over the finish line' or the team with the most goals, and so on. Here again there are important conditions of validity, the playing field should be level, all should leave the starting block at the same time, and procedures do require some oversight and discretion from referees and line judges, etc.. But these do not decide the outcome itself, and all things being equal, the outcome is embodied in the event itself, and very difficult to question for this reason. Furthermore, this 'realisation in the act' is also characteristic of general competition in the market, construed as a 'level playing field'. These two extremes define a range, from competition ritual as highly 'artificial' and dependent on accepted expert judgement at one end, to competition as highly 'natural' and decided more by performance itself at the other end. In between there is a curious hybrid category. This is characterised by decision by election, epitomised by democratic politics. Here the expertise of those eligible to vote, however minimal, meets the skill of the contestants on the electoral 'playing field', with an outcome that averages out all these forces. The artifice of expertise is tempered by the cut and thrust of a more 'natural' form of competition, and the brute naturalness is tempered by the electoral averaging of the wisdom of the voters. And in many elections (or referenda) the voters are choosing leaders or outcomes for themselves, not 'dispassionately' judging outcomes for others, nor simply spectating at a moment of personal victory for the winner. Again, my point is that these multiple forms help build a conceptual bridge from the artificial to the natural, from judgment by 'right', to outcomes by 'might', suggesting a deep interpenetration of these through the sheer multiplicity of myriad forms and instances.

IV. Conclusion: challenges for research

This paper has been a conceptual mapping exercise, but I aim to develop new empirical research out of these ideas, using the concept of ritual as an analytic frame for studying competition. I see various challenges to be confronted in developing this possibility, and would welcome comment and suggestions.

First, I may be wrong, but I suspect it will take some doing to advance an approach to ritual that detaches it from the widespread Durkheimian preoccupations with the sacred/profane distinction, and the intensification of emotional bonds and social solidarity. I think this tends to be the common sense, default way of thinking about ritual, at least in sociology. Much of this paper has been about arguing for a different perspective. But by arguing for an understanding of competition rituals as a complex of practices running from the 'high' to the 'low', I have defined the object of study as in some sense vast. The argument is macroscopic.

Second, following on from this, is how to choose exemplar competition rituals for comparative study. How can a manageable sample be approached out of all this diversity? Does one work within one of the 'domains' outlined in the second section (Economic, Political, Belief-Making)? Or try to sample and juxtapose one or more types from within each? Competition law and legislation is an obvious example of an area where all three domains interpenetrate (and an antitrust lawsuit is both an example of a competition ritual, and centrally about the idea of competition). Would it help to examine competition rituals linked to specific professions: lawyers, bankers, scientists (cf. Hull 1988), artists, politicians, and so on?

Third, there is the question of what kind of data to collect. There is the observation, recording and analysis of ritual events. One can also collect data on the context and para-practices involved in making selected rituals possible. One can focus on the perceptions of participants and expert practitioners, through interviews, surveys, etc.. (E.g., how congruent are winners', losers' and officiants' views on the legitimacy of the ritual and its outcomes?) Are there any large data sets that might be useful, e.g. for tracking ritual change?

Finally, the study of ritual has often been the study of ritual form, performance, and creation of meaning. It tends towards 'reading' the ritual over the shoulders of the participants (Bell 2009). Returning to my first point, how do we connect the 'close reading' of competition rituals to the macroscopic analysis of their historical emergence, form and function? What kind of concrete empirical data does one need to collect in order to be best able to do this? These are the kinds of questions I am wrestling with as I try to move this research from the conceptual to the empirical stage.

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Abstract

This talk provides an overview of a developing research project on the transformation of the concept of competition, and its increasing institutionalisation, in the historical formation of modern liberal culture. I argue that competition is a core cultural concept that is crucial in organising and legitimating power relations in liberal forms of society. It facilitates authoritative allocations of power and rewards in a form of society that is typically suspicious of authority, and it does this across multiple domains: economics, politics, science, the arts, and so on. Particularly telling here, is the way competition exhibits many of the key features of 'ritual' typically associated with religion. It dramatizes core cultural values, performatively transforms the social roles of participants, inculcates community, and authorises outcomes by linking them to an underlying cosmological order. I present competition as a key to the cultural analysis of liberal society.