

# London REDO workshop: Ritual and Democracy

## September/October 2015

*This document presents the conceptual framework and detailed program for the REDO project's workshop in London, September 29 – October 1, 2015.*

### Framework

The objectives for the workshop are to discuss the concept of *democracy* and to lay the groundwork for the proposed volume of essays on Ritual and Democracy, a key output of the REDO project. The focus of this workshop is not on our paper presentations – although we want a short, focused 5-minute presentation from each REDO scholar that clarifies how their work will address the ritual : democracy problematic. Our aim, rather, is to develop a sustained conversation among ourselves and with our guests. As such, we want the focus to be on discussion.

### Abstracts

We have invited contributions from three Open University colleagues whose work, we hope, you will find challenging, stimulating and engaging. We hope that these contributions will help us navigate a complex terrain of political science, philosophy and sociology and forge bridgeheads with our own expertise in theology, religious studies and anthropology.

#### **Dr Zaki Nahaboo, INTO City University and The Open University**

*'Political Correctness and Iconoclasm: Creating liberal citizens through 'Je Suis Charlie''*

This article charts how a dominant way of overcoming political correctness constituted a liberal citizenry. The prohibition of words and images, so as not to cause offence to minoritised groups, has often been viewed as an assault on liberalism perpetuated by a left-wing elite. In response to these media and political assertions, numerous scholars have demonstrated political correctness to be a productive fiction. These studies revealed how a myth of censorship mobilises free speech as a proxy for discrimination against minoritised groups. What requires further attention is the type of free speech that becomes constituted in a dichotomous relation with political correctness, along with its effects on shaping a liberal citizenry. Through the recent Charlie Hebdo cartoons and killings in Paris, I explore how the pictorial representation of Muhammad aimed to re-figure, rather than destroy, a latent image. Islamists were represented as idolaters if they fail to become tolerant of this type of iconoclasm. This intensified the religious significance of the picture. In addition, the relation between the cartoonists and Islamists illustrated more than a mutual cultivation of an 'us' and 'them'. The cartoons were also an exercise in undermining an alleged 'Western' taboo of political correctness from an assumed position of subjugated truth telling. These developments in the Charlie Hebdo case are shown to constitute a liberal citizenry through tethering *parrhesia* to iconoclasm. I argue that this constitutive moment instilled a problematic way of demarcating a liberal citizenry. Creating and transgressing a taboo of political

correctness, failing to secularise pictures of Muhammad, and claiming victimhood in the face of 'evil' exemplify how the liberal citizen became forged through resentment. Claiming a position of weakness in relation to a constructed other, while asserting moral superiority, needs to be overcome if enactments of liberal citizenship are to be disassociated from a mechanistic orientalism.

**Dr Agnes Czajka, The Open University**

*'#direncezi: Rituals of Resistance and the Struggle for Democracy in Turkey'*

The 2013 anti-government protests in Turkey – rendered in social media by the hashtag *direncezi* (resistgezi) – were a watershed moment in the at least decade old struggle for Turkish democracy. Against government rhetoric that depicted them as a motley crew of atheists, hoodlums, petty criminals and foreign provocateurs determined to undermine Turkey's conservative, Muslim democracy, protesters at times re-interpreted, re-appropriated and engaged with the very 'conservative', 'Muslim' rituals they were ostensibly undermining. In the context of competing discursive and non-discursive articulations of democracy that came to a head during and in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests, the proposed paper will analyse such instances of re-appropriation – including the organization of a communal *iftar* (fast-breaking evening meal) during Ramadan – and their significance for reimagining democracy in Turkey. Using Derrida's work on democracy, and particularly his notion of 'democracy-to-come', the paper will investigate the possibilities that such re-appropriations open up for democracy in Turkey.

**Prof Marie Gillespie, The Open University**

*Media, ritual and democracy during 'critical events'*

This paper draws on a series of ethnographic studies of media audiences during 'critical events' (in the sense intended by Indian anthropologist Veena Das), to offer a comparative and historical perspective on the media-ritual-democracy nexus. From the mass ritualised viewing of Indian sacred TV serials, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, and their association with the rise of Hindu nationalism in the early 1990s, to more recent social media encounters with Islamic state violence, media rituals have been exploited by political groups for malign ideological purposes. They may also serve benign and progressive political ends, as witnessed during various grassroots uprisings from Egypt to Occupy. While we can certainly understand media rituals as benign performances that have the potential to inspire political activism and change, there is an urgent need to get a much better grasp of the difference that new forms of digital and social media rituals, and serial genres in particular, can make to democracy. We need to go beyond simplistic polarities of utopian and dystopian approaches to new media to understand how and when ritual forms of media and communication can become destructive to democracy and how they may be more effectively mobilised to promote democratic deepening during 'critical events' like the current refugee crisis.

## Workshop program

### Tuesday September 29

- 09:00 – 09:30 Tea & coffee
- 09:30 – 10:00 Introduction – Graham Harvey
- 10:00 – 11:15 Discussion: Ritual and democracy definitions  
(these are appended to the end of this document)
- 11:15 – 11:30 *Break*
- 11:30 – 12:45 Zaki Nahaboo  
'Political Correctness and Iconoclasm: Creating liberal Citizens through  
"Je Suis Charlie"' followed by Q & A
- 12:45 – 14:00 *Lunch*
- 14:00 – 15:15 Agnes Czajka  
'#direngezi: Rituals of Resistance and the Struggle for Democracy in Turkey'  
followed by Q & A
- 15:15 – 15:45 *Break*
- 15:45 – 17:00 Roundtable discussion

### Wednesday September 30

- 09:30 – 10:00 Introduction – Paul-François Tremlett
- 10:00 – 11:15 Marie Gillespie  
'Media, ritual and democracy during 'critical events'' followed by Q & A
- 11:15 – 11:30 *Break*
- 11:30 – 13:15 Lighting Presentations  
(8 x 10-minute presentations by REDO members)
- 13:15 – 14:15 *Lunch*
- 14:15 – 15:45 Lighting Presentations  
(8 x 10-minute presentations by REDO members)
- 15:45 – 16:15 *Break*
- 16:15 – 17:00 Discussion: Ritual and democracy definitions

### Thursday October 1

- 09:30 – 10:30 Ritual and Democracy editors meeting
- 10:30 – 11:00 *Break*
- 11:00 – 13:00 Ritual and Democracy contributors and editors meeting
- 13:00 – 14:00 *Lunch*
- 14:00 – 15:00 Concluding Remarks – Graham Harvey & Paul-François Tremlett

## Conceptual definitions

(as they were discussed at workshop in April 2013)

### Ritual:

1. Ritual is a mode of communicative action built of verbal and non-verbal elements, with a potential of expressing reference to a set of collectively shared meanings, which could be reiterated (or not) in the wake of the practice.
2. A structured, embodied, sequence of motions, actions, or combinations of word, actions, movements. Rituals generally mix repetition and difference. Rituals can be both personal and social, but most likely have a social effect or some sort. They can involve multiple media and forms of communication, word, image, sound, sensory, etc. action. They can be conscious and unconscious, implied and explicit, invoking several realms of being (human, divine, animal, 'non-animated' references/agents), and relations. They are ambivalent in their moral impact, i.e. they can have 'good' and 'bad' effects (whatever that means for whatever perspective) whether it solidifies. They are also ambivalent regarding whether or how they effect or transform social practices for a particular person, group, or sets of constituents.
3. "Ritual" is a particular, implicit or explicit pragmatic presupposition for (inter)action, or in other words, a particular way of paying attention to what one is doing (with others) : instead of persons' behaviour being held to reflect their emotional and intentional dispositions, the latter are presumed to derive from their carrying out of certain items of behaviour; attention is focused not on how persons' thoughts and feelings may be expressed through their actions, but on how the accomplishment of certain actions may have an effect on their thoughts and feelings.
4. Ritual is bodily action; it is a quality of action, a distinctive way in which an action can be performed. The ritualization of an action can transform any actions to ritual actions. Ritualization implies that the ritual agent adopt a particular attitude to his or her action – a ritual commitment or stance (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994:4). The ritualization process involves a kind of bodily tacit

knowledge which is not always explained or to which the ritualized agents have a conscious concept or relation (Bell 1992, pp. 220-221). However, participation in rituals is not only subjection or submission of a prevailing pattern or an emotional regime. The American ritual scholar Catherine Bell emphasizes how people ritualized rather than passively subordinating the ritual schemes. The ritualized agents do not relate to ritual action as 'an inflexible set of assumptions, beliefs or body postures; rather it is the ability to deploy and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively' (Bell 1992:221).

5. Ritual is repeatable communicative acts
  
6. A central aspect of ritual(ization) is the gap between conscious intentionality and bodily performance. This gap can lead to a paradoxical experience of 'active passivity' or 'passive activity'. Participation in the ritual requires an active embodied involvement yet the aim of the ritual tends to be beyond the capability of the participants. Something happens in the ritual which, on one hand, requires the subject's active participation, yet on the other hand annuls the voluntary intention. I find that Mikhail Bakhtin's descriptions of carnivalization and the 'grotesque body' can illumine what is at stake in ritualization because people in the carnival square, like literary characters, are continuously in the process of becoming—becoming not only as individuals but as beings that interact with others. Also, in addition to their own birth, they are in the process of giving birth to something outside themselves. The 'grotesque body' is thus 'a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.' (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317) Laughing, eating, and drinking are among the most characteristic manifestations of the grotesque bodies participating in carnival. From a theological perspective the connection between the social event of eating/drinking and being transformed into something larger shares significant common ground with the ritualistic celebration of the Eucharist.

7. I think it is possible to apply Paul Ricoeur's reflections on poetic (metaphorical) speech to the function of rituals in social communication/interactions.

We characterize speech as poetical when words, as the basic semantic elements, are combined in new and challenging ways, which enables new, but not (yet) fixed meanings to emerge. Metaphorical/poetic language has a surplus of (potential) meaning, which cannot be controlled – at least, as long as the metaphor is kept alive. In order for language to be characterized as poetical, the utterance must be the result of an *intentional* action. But in spite of this intentionality, the effects of poetic language need not be cognitive. In the same way which poetic speech plays with words, rituals add an element of play to already existing patterns of social behavior. The play between sameness (the words) and difference (the new combinations of words), which we find in poetic language, is also found in rituals. As the ability to create and read poetics utterances is a skill that must be developed, ritualized behavior also presupposes skills. Rituals represent a breaking away from ordinary, everyday behavior and provides *possibilities* for new social meanings. In this way, rituals may be the source of re-signification processes of human beings' bodies, of social relationships and of shared social spaces. The question is whether the rituals or ritualizations are also a precondition for these social changes.

### **Democracy:**

1. A concept that refers to a framework for moving social groups towards a more equitable distribution of power, resources, land, and peaceful coexistence. Based on ancient Greek notions of the political, when used it generally refers to historically transformed and recontextualized ideas of social coexistence based upon global, localized reconstruction of the human person and sense of equality, liberty, etc. Underlying the vision of democracy is another Greek- inspired term and transformed by Graeco-Roman and Christian notions of justice.
2. "Democracy" is a collective decision-making process positing equal say for all participating parties.

3. Democracy is
4. Democracy is more than to participate equally in the proposal, development, and creation of laws and regulation of the society. To participate equally encompasses social, economic and cultural conditions. It does not matter to have all the legal rights if you are not culturally visible, accepted and tolerated in the society. Nor does it matter if the democratic practice is so limited that it does not accept different activities, ways of communication and network building. Democracy is about taking part in democratic process of formal and informal domain forms. This democratic form encompasses a variety of expressions and engagements not only in clearly in written or spoken forms (Banerjee 2008). Ritual activity may foster participation in democracy from below (Appadurai 2001) and trigger democratic impulses (Kertzer 1988).
5. Democracy is increasing social participation
6. Democracy is an ideal of letting the inhabitants of a country rule and develop their common society.
7. We may speak of democracy when the distribution of power (political, cultural, economic) to influence the development (or preservation) of shared social spaces, which individual citizens considered relevant, is governed by the norms of social justice.