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The Theory of Play / Games and Sacrality in Popular Culture

The Relevance of Roger Caillois for Contemporary Neo-Durkheimian Cultural Theory

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Why Caillois? Why Now?

The question of the trajectory of Durkheimian thought after the death of Durkheim in 1917 is of great interest to many scholars. Increasing attention has been paid in recent years to the place of the Collège de Sociologie in that legacy (e.g., Hollier 1979; Kurasawa 1998; Richman 2002; Marroquin 2005). The focus of much of this scholarship, however, has been on one participant in the Collège, Georges Bataille. Both those who see the Collège as a legitimate inheritor of the Durkheimian mantle (e.g., Richman 2002) and those who do not (e.g., Marcel 2001) place central importance on the person and work of Bataille.

There were however other members of the Collège, some of whom in fact had a much closer institutional connection to the Durkheimian group through Durkheim's nephew, Marcel Mauss, than Bataille did. Roger Caillois is perhaps the most important of these others.¹ The work of Caillois is still relatively little known outside the French-speaking world. Largely considered a figure of the literary avant-garde when he is known at all among English-speaking academics,² he was in fact a thinker of immensely broad interests, with intellectual connections spanning from surrealist circles to Durkheimian ethnography. Unlike Bataille, he actually studied under Marcel Mauss (and Georges Dumézil) and some of the most compelling work he authored took up themes he explicitly recognized as having to do with sociology and social theory.

His full legacy to social theory and to sociology remains to be summarized by a future commentator.³ My more limited intention here is to attempt to bring some attention to his now rather little-known essay *Man, Play, and Games* and the contribution it makes to a recasting of cultural theory that I will argue is particularly relevant (despite the fact that the book was written in the late 1950s) for much of the cultural landscape in

contemporary America (and, by extension, to other parts of the Western capitalist world) in 2005.

First, we must situate this piece of cultural theory more broadly within a particular tradition of thinking of culture and attempt to demonstrate how in fact this theory of games is actually also a theory of symbolic and ritual interaction and even (strange as it may sound) a theory of the sacred. As already noted, Caillois was a student of Mauss, one of the most important figures in the 20th century in the French social sciences; more, he wrote a study on the sacred that was in many ways an effort at the summary work on the subject from a Durkheimian perspective that many had expected Mauss to produce at some point (Caillois 1950). In this work, he elaborated on the theory of the sacred contained in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. In that earlier work, Durkheim had made it clear that he was making an argument not merely for the meaning of religion, but for the meaning of culture more broadly. He argues ceaselessly there that religion has a central importance in the life of society because it is the original means by which collective representations, the symbolic material of each cultural object, are created:

We have established ... that the fundamental categories of thought ... have religious origins ... nearly all of the great social institutions are born of religion ... if religion has given birth to everything essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion. (Durkheim 1912: 598-599)⁴

His rejection then of the notion of an individualist religion is on very much the same grounds as one would reject an individualist notion of culture. These things require 'warmth, life, enthusiasm, the exaltation of all mental activities, the transporting of the individual above himself' (ibid.: 607), that is, they require that others collectively share the symbols and derive the same effervescent energy from them. The argument in the *Forms* is essentially that culture is nothing less than the obligation to construct and reconstruct the sacred in social life.

One of the most telling and celebrated passages in the *Elementary Forms* comes in the conclusion, where Durkheim speculates on the future of the sacred. After summarizing the historical lesson of his analysis of totemism, which he presents as the most primitive form of religious life, he passes to a consideration of the changing face and forms of the experience of the sacred in modernity. There is no question, in his view, of its eternity, for 'there can be no society that does not feel the need to maintain and strengthen...the collective sentiments and the collective ideas that unify it' (ibid.: 610). The forms by which this affirmation of collective sentiments is expressed can be expected to change, especially in the light of the continuing encroachment of science on the traditional realm of religious knowledge. Durkheim however avoids much speculation on the nature of these changes in form, beyond a few references to patriotic political rituals and displays:

As for knowing what the symbols that will come to express the new faith will be, if they will be more adequate to the reality it will be their task to translate, this is a question that surpasses the human ability to specify. (ibid.: 611)

The Sacred's New Clothes: Popular Culture, Sport/Play Forms, and Sacrality

What then of these new forms of the sacred? How will this foundation of culture mutate and present itself differently as modernity becomes hyper-modernity or post-modernity? What might a neo-Durkheimian theory of the sacred focus on in the contemporary cultural landscape as the site or sites for the enactment of the sacred? Caillois's theory of games and specifically the way in which we can see these game forms working themselves out in contemporary popular culture provides useful suggestions in the way of answers to these questions.

We might ask first precisely how the realm of secular, contemporary popular culture can enact the sacred. Here, I would suggest we must recall the historical origins of popular culture in the Western world. As e.g., Peter Burke (among others) have indicated, the world of Carnival is one of the central sites in which the seeds of modern popular culture were sown, and this was an important site in which the religio-sacred insinuated itself into broader forms of social practice and ritual. Obviously originally tied to a religious calendar and understanding of the world, the phenomenon of Carnival nonetheless became broader and larger than its religious origins. The dramatic and orgiastic practices of Carnival excess were carried out in the form of song and dance, the playing of roles and bearing of masks in structured and unstructured settings, and competitive games such as races, jousting or football matches. The ecstatic nature of the events was most basically captured in mass transgression regarding food, sex and violence, all of which were engaged in during this period in amounts and manners prohibited during the rest of the year. The tenor and nature of Carnival became a kind of template for the activities that would later make up much of the realm of contemporary popular culture: e.g., fairs and festivals, concerts, sporting competitions, dramatic presentations and role-playing (Burke 1978:182-5).

This is however not enough to fully ground an argument that play forms in popular culture can be seen as forms of intersection with the sacred. We must push theoretically a bit further into the definition of play that Caillois provides. What is most essential to defining the sacred, according to the Durkheimian tradition? Its opposition to the profane. But beyond this, we can be yet more specific. The sacred is defined by a transcendence of ordinary experience, brought about through interactive participation in specific ritualized acts that are intended to represent symbolic truths of a mysterious nature. These acts take place in specific spaces and times set aside from the everyday in rigorous ways. The attitude of the actors is simultaneously characterized by ecstatic abandon and serious attention to rules. In an

appendix to his book on the sacred, Caillois notes that the realm of play/games can be productively paralleled to that of the sacred. It is worth quoting him at length to get the full sense of his meaning here:

Certainly, believer and player, religion and play, temple and chessboard, seem to have nothing in common ... But ... play can [easily] be joined to the serious. Examples are abundant and persuasive, to list a few, the child, the sportsman, and the actor ... So it is with religion ... An enclosed space is delimited, separated from the world and from life. In this enclosure, for a given time, regulated and symbolic movements are executed, which represent or incarnate mysterious realities in the course of the ceremonies, in which, just as in play, the opposing qualities of exuberance and regimentation, of ecstasy and prudence, and of enthusiastic delirium and minute precision, are present at the same time. At last, one transcends ordinary existence. (Caillois 1950:207-208).

Caillois offers one serious obstacle to the notion, however, of reducing the sacred to the play instinct. The latter is in his view pure form, 'activity which finds its end in itself', while the sacred in its religious forms is 'pure content: indivisible, transitory, ambiguous, efficacious force'. Play, he goes on, 'rests, relaxes, distracts, and causes the dangers, cares, and travails of life to be forgotten', while the sacred 'is the domain of internal tension, from which it is precisely profane existence that relaxes, rests, and distracts' (Caillois 1950:212). His claim here, that the sacred is somehow more serious than play by its very nature, is in fact contrary to the overall tenor of the work on play.

Yet this is clearly true only in *some* play situations, not in all. He suggests we can discount examples of the seriousness of professional athletes as stemming only from their financial motives—they are after all only 'working', for Caillois. This *a priori* presumption about their motivations may be true in many cases, but in all? How then to explain, e.g., NBA superstar Karl Malone and Gary Payton taking huge pay cuts (Malone's salary drop for the year was somewhere in the vicinity of \$18 million) during the 2004-5 season in order to make a run at something that has eluded them both (and eluded them again last season) in their long and illustrious basketball careers, namely, a championship? And what of the serious amateur play of e.g., Olympic athletes? It seems clear that their play and its consequences are quite as serious as the religious observation of many; indeed, their dedication often directly mirrors the kind of ritualistic obsession of the behavior of the religiously devout. More, arguably even in what seems much less serious play, there is still often present a drive to win or to perform at a high level that is rather far from the 'relax[ation]' that Caillois claims as central to play. I can offer a personal example here. I often play chess with a small group of friends, generally over coffee at a local café. We do not play for money and our games are immersed in roundabout conversation about a wide variety of topics—international politics, baseball, the latest 'American Idol' competition. An unknowing onlooker might frame our games as Caillois apparently would, that is, as relaxed, unserious, devoid of the tension present in engagement with the sacred. Yet I know that my own

attitude to the games is ferociously competitive, more or less so depending upon the opponent (some friends have beaten me more regularly than others, and those opponents tend to bring out the most seriousness in me). I am also stricken by a sense of impending dread and fear when a game begins to turn in the favor of an opponent, for example, after an extremely foolish move on my part. Several of the other players who regularly participate also have mentioned to me how much it matters to them, if not necessarily always to win, at least to play well and not be embarrassed by being easily beaten (a task that is often difficult, as some of the players in the group are quite a lot better than others).

And what of the serious fan or betting man/woman? Play and games obviously can take on a tremendous seriousness for these individuals; this is implicitly recognized when e.g., some colleges (e.g., recently, the University of Maryland) begin to move to make and enforce 'rules of engagement' for fans at men's basketball games because the fans are deemed to be taking the games so seriously as to behave in ways beyond the accepted norms of proper conduct *vis-à-vis* opposing players and fans. We see this also at the professional level in the recent cases involving altercations between fans and players, most (in)famously, for American audiences, the 'Malice at the Palace' fight in November 2004 between members of the Indiana Pacers and Detroit fans and, for European audiences, the flare throwing debacle in April 2005 at the AC Milan soccer match. Much has been said about these incidents, especially by those who would like to see the role of sport in Western society diminish and seize on such incidents as a way to condemn athletic contest in general, but one thing that certainly seems obvious is that these are examples of people taking these games very, very seriously.

Another distinction Caillois makes here has to do with the stakes involved. Stakes are set by the player in games, he suggests, while the stakes exceed them in interaction with the sacred. But what about situations in which a possible stake of play is death or serious bodily injury? Does it lessen the seriousness of e.g., the risk of being paralyzed in a football game or killed in a bull riding contest simply because the players understand this to be a possibility in advance and in a sense accept it by participating? Less than a week prior to the day on which I write this, an Arena League Football player died on the field in Los Angeles after being struck in the head while making a tackle. Can it be argued that stakes such as these are somehow less than those undertaken e.g., by Catholics in their interaction with the Holy Eucharist, especially from the vantage point of a sociological observer who cannot accept at face value the mystical claims of the latter but certainly recognizes the objective fact of the death of the former?

Agon, Alea, Mimicry, and Ilinx in the Contemporary World

While taking seriously Caillois's reluctance to fully reduce the sacred to a kind of play form, we are yet on firm ground in attempting to investigate in

more detail the relationship between play forms and the sacred. Caillois delineates four different forms of play, distinguishable by their forms and objects. *Agon* is play oriented toward aggressive competition between two players or teams. *Alea* (the Latin term for 'game of dice') is play in which chance or fate, rather than the skills of the contestants, decides the outcome. *Mimicry* is play involving disguises and dissimulation, in which participants take on imaginary identities and roles and engage in dramatic performances. Finally, *ilinx* is play that is based on the pursuit of vertigo or extreme physical and psychological states for the purpose of 'destroy[ing] the stability of perception and inflict[ing] a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind' (Caillois 1958:65).

Caillois's intention is to construct a kind of historical sociology of play/games. There is, in his view, an historical movement leading from societies based in mimicry and vertigo to societies based in agon and alea. In pre-modern societies, mimicry was the central face of government (rulers masked as gods); the entire adult world in these societies was dissimulated to non-adults until the moment of their initiation into the adult world, at which point the truth could be revealed. Rationalization in modernity is what brings about the change from the complex mimicry/ilinx to that of agon/alea. Individuals in modernity recognize dissimulation as a matter of course and the great mysteries that are manipulated in games of mimicry have been demystified: 'One begins to understand that death is irrevocable and there is no magic that can vanquish it' (Caillois 1958:205). Likewise, ilinx becomes more rationalized. Here he invokes Dumézil's discussion (presaged of course by Weber's) of the move from charismatic to rational forms of power to demonstrate the weakening of ilinx in modernity. Modernity, Caillois argues, demands 'uniformity [of] social life' and endeavors to systematically disallow the disorder that is often present in effervescent religious ritual and in play.

But how clear is it that Caillois's reading of the historical progression of games/play is correct? In fact many of the readings of the postmodern condition indicate, in an oblique way that I will try to make more specific, that, if indeed modernity and the accompanying rationalization meant a rejection of mimicry/ilinx, *postmodernity marks a kind of return to the pre-modern complex of mimicry/ilinx*. The intersection between the political and mimicry in pre-modernity is emphasized by Caillois, but how clearly can we say that this bond is broken in modernity? Caillois notes that

[p]erhaps the last attempt at political domination through masks was that of Hakim al-Mokanna ... he wore a green veil on his face, or a golden mask that he never removed, according to some writers. He claimed to be God and declared that he covered his face because any mortal seeing it would become blind. (Caillois 1958:207-208)

Certainly we see no examples of such brazen, overt use of masks in the modern political world, but what, one wonders, would Caillois make of the election to the highest office in the largest, most powerful American state

of a man known throughout the country (and the world) primarily as a superhuman Mr. Universe icon and a robotic superman from another time in the cinematic imaginary world he formerly inhabited? And it must be noted too that Governor Arnold is hardly a unique phenomenon in American politics. The former governor of the state of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, is another such superhuman heroic figure, a professional wrestler descended to the realm of the mortals to govern. Numerous other examples of actors or other entertainment figures moving into politics are readily available, e.g., the now-deceased former Republican Congressman and Cher sidekick Sonny Bono, former Republican Congressman and television star on the '70s program 'The Love Boat' Fred Grandy. Even former President Ronald Reagan came to the political arena from the myth-producing land of Hollywood.

This manifestation of mimicry in the contemporary world points us toward another, one to which Caillois in fact indirectly alludes. He discusses identification with successful individuals and heroes as a 'degraded and diluted form of mimicry' (Caillois 1958:236). In our contemporary world, it is primarily the realm of media and sports stars that provides the masks that we don. We cannot ourselves all win at the game of fame and individual achievement, but we can identify ourselves with those who have. We can watch television programs and read magazine articles about them and copy their manners of speech, dress, etc. We can undergo plastic surgery in order to have the nose or the breasts of our idol, a phenomenon documented, and some would say encouraged, by numerous television programs (e.g., 'Dr. 90210'; 'Extreme Makeover,' 'I Want a Famous Face'). Some of us even go so far in this 'game' as to completely lose the sense of reality that ultimately allows us to understand that, however much we imitate these figures, we are not them (viz., Mark David Chapman, the murderer of John Lennon who seems to have believed he was the ex-Beatle; Yolanda Saldívar, the murderer of the Latina singer Selena, who was president of her fan club and apparently desired to take her place).

Caillois is clearly correct that agon and alea are present in the contemporary world, and, more, their forms have taken on an even more clearly charged centrality in the cultural landscapes of modern societies. Lotteries and other games of chance command vast sums of economic expenditure in the Western world. These games of chance are, according to Caillois:

a striking form of injustice, of gratuitous and undeserved favor ... also a mockery of work ... of saving, of willingly sacrificing for the future—in sum, a mockery of all the virtues needed in a world dedicated to the accumulation of wealth. (Caillois 1958:303-304)

The purportedly rational bases of modern societies are deeply antagonistic to such games, and hyper-rationalist societies like the former Soviet Union attempted to prohibit such forms of social life because they so clearly contradicted the rules of those societies, and yet these forms live on and

continue to generate a veneration and an ardor that can be directly seen in Las Vegas and in the many gambling resorts set up on American Indian reservation land.⁵ It is worth noting here the historical point Caillouis raises concerning the very bases of democratic society in the West: democracy was in its early Greek forms not carried out by agonistic competition for the right to rule, but rather by aleatory processes, the drawing of lots, and the deep insinuation in democratic history of typically Greek notions of luck (*tyche*), the right time (*kairos*), destiny (*moira*) should serve as a reminder to us of how deeply even seemingly hyper-rational social realms like that of the polity are in fact tied into forms of play/games (Caillouis 1958:217).

Another powerful example of a sacred play/game space in contemporary Western society is that of agonistic sport. Competitive professional sports are a gigantic industry in which few participate directly as athletes, while vast numbers involve themselves as fans and participants in their absorbing. When we see e.g., professional football aficionados in their absorption in the games, we are seeing manifestations of agon, alea, and mimicry all at the same time. Much has already been written on the collective ritual character of football; Baudrillard (1983) uses it⁶ as an example of the kind of unproductive activity geared to pure expenditure and waste that the modern Westerner chooses over the 'productive' realm of the political, and a significant amount has been said already about identification with teams and fan rivalries and riots. But little attempt has been made to date to focus this inquiry under the broad theoretical heading of the sacred that I am suggesting in following Caillouis.⁷

But, for all this, I would argue that sacred play forms based in ilinx and mimicry are still *more* present in our contemporary Western world. The examples are myriad. We have seen the ritualistic mimicry of tattooing and body scarification/modification take on an importance in the past decade that was unheard of in earlier modernity. Indeed, body modification is now taken in some cases to the extremes of altering one's gender. The vast expanse of the realm of tourism has been well documented in many sociological and anthropological studies; here, we see a kind of ritualistic drama of 'Otherness' being played out for eager audiences. In my own state of Pennsylvania, the Amish community is 'performed' on a regular basis, by both real Amish and others pretending to be so, for large groups of curious tourists. Television programs (e.g., 'Crossing Over with John Edward') have emerged dealing with the American fascination with communicating with 'the realm of the beyond,' in which well-rehearsed actors enact the drama of summoning up messages from the dead and willing crowds cry for more. Sites of popular music performance have taken on an even more exaggerated Carnavalesque atmosphere, as have other ritualistic collective displays of orgiastic drama (e.g., Burning Man, where neo-hippie tribes gather in the Oregon desert to engage in pseudo-pagan festivities; the performances of Survival Research Laboratories, in which gigantic robotic creatures destroy one another in pitched combat⁸). The realm of popular music has also been a powerful site for the enactment of the sacred in Western society

since at least the mid-1950s (the era of the birth of rock and roll, the first true mass, commercial popular music) and, since then, we have seen the proliferation of many different popular music forms, the latest of which, rap/hip hop, is rapidly expanding around the globe in myriad national and regional forms. These forms have all given shape to mass popular performances in which large groups commune together around shared symbols, languages, customs, and meanings that in every important way fit the definition given above of the sacred.

Raves and other ecstatic social gatherings, clearly connected to mimicry, can be seen also as forms of ilinx insofar as they are dedicated to a communal experience of intoxication through dance and the imbibing of often illegal substances. Extreme sports such as bungee jumping, parachuting and other more dangerous physical activity have become a mainstream American cultural phenomenon. Much American TV media is saturated by this material (e.g., 'Jackass,' numerous 'Extreme Sports' and 'Extreme Video' programs). The obsession with gym culture/body building is both an effort to achieve the perfect physique and to repeatedly experience the 'high' of physical training, often to an extreme level. Much cultural studies literature has looked at gym/body culture through the lens of the politics of the body, objectification of the female (and increasingly also the male) body, and the complex of gender political relations, and these are all legitimate tools of analysis (e.g., Moore 1997; Fisher 1997). Theoretically, this has meant a reading of the sociology of the body as part of a general *desacralization* of social life, in which individualization and commodification of bodies is the overall framework of understanding (Gill et al. 2005). But what much of this literature misses is precisely the element of collective ecstatic pursuit through the particular *askesis* of weight-lifting and exercise. Wacquant's recent account of the cultural location of the boxing gym begins to get at this experience of ilinx via ascetic practice:

[The gym is] the vector of a *debanalization of everyday life* ... that turns bodily routine and remolding into a bridge to a distinctive sensorial and emotional universe in which adventure, masculine honor, and prestige intermingle ... The monastic ... character of the pugilistic 'program of life' turns the individual into his own arena of challenge and invites him to discover himself, better yet to produce himself. (Wacquant 2004:14-15, emphasis added)

More attention needs to be paid to this aspect of many game and play practices.

Caillouis's theory of games and play might well serve as a template for a new sociology of the sacred in postmodernity, with additional contributions coming from the work of a number of other thinkers essentially in this same neo-Durkheimian tradition. Some of the work of Jean Baudrillard in the 1970s, which I have cited above, and the recent work of Michel Maffesoli, who has written of the orgiastic nature of contemporary Western society and the 'return of the tragic' in the affirmation of intense, spontaneous experience in game situations (Maffesoli 1991, 2003), backgrounds

the more specific categorizations of Caillois with broader theoretical undergirding. Randall Collins's recent work provides a micro-sociological perspective on popular culture rituals that clearly indicates the precise, situational ways in which sports events and the other kinds of 'leisure' cultural practices outlined in this article create sacredness. It is worth quoting him at length:

Games are rituals, contrived to produce situations of dramatic tension ... [and] moments of collective emotion. It is perfectly in keeping with such developments that sports emblems become sacred objects, venerated and treated with respect. Sports celebrities are themselves sacred objects, in just the same manner that Durkheim (1912/1965, 243-44) describes a political leader becoming an emblem for the crowd of which he is a center of attention ... What motivates people to witness games is primarily the experience of being at a highly successful ritual: successful because it has been contrived so that the ritual ingredients will all be present to a very high degree, especially the occurrence of strong emotion in a setting where it can be amplified by bodily interaction within the crowd focusing attention on the action of the game. *The leisure time of modern societies ... has become dominated by this species of deliberately invented ritual, designed to provide moments of ritual solidarity that previously would have been provided by religion, warfare, or political ceremony.* Sports events ... are generally regarded as a form of play, of the non-serious part of the world. *Nevertheless, they are eminently successful in providing high points of ritual experience, and for many people they are preferred to participating in religious rituals.* (Collins 2004:58-9, emphasis added)

The theoretical body for understanding this change in the form of the sacred exists. What remains is to synthesize its various parts and begin to study the various play and game forms in contemporary popular culture from the perspective it presents. Caillois provides an excellent set of categories with which to start such an investigation.

Notes

1. Much more needs to be understood in the English-speaking social science world concerning the importance of Michel Leiris in this tradition as well.
2. This despite the fact that the two most sociological of his books (*Man and the Sacred* and *Man, Play, and Games*) have long been available in English. More recently, a collected volume of some of his other previously untranslated writings has been published by Duke University Press (Caillois 2003).
3. There is as yet no full biographical account in English, though Claudine Frank's introduction to Caillois (2004) gives a reasonable short account of important details of his life. A very excellent intellectual biography in French capably illuminates Caillois's connection to French social theory and sociology (Odile Felgine, *Roger Caillois, biographie* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1994)).

4. This and all subsequent translations from French texts are my own.
5. Caillois notes anthropological evidence suggesting the deep orientation toward *alea* found in Native American societies and this is arguably still evident in contemporary American Indian social life.
6. He is of course talking about European football (soccer) rather than North American football.
7. Indeed, one of the most interesting efforts to read sport as ritualistic activity and to locate sociological theory applicable to this reading does not even mention Caillois (see Birrell 1981).
8. The numerous television programs in which robots built by contestants fight one another is a kind of popular media version of this latter phenomenon (e.g., 'BattleBots'). There is now even a 'Robot Fighting League (RFL)' dedicated to 'the sport of fighting robots' with a website at www.botleague.com.

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SECTION III