Institutionalized Licence and Normative Stability
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The type of phenomenon under study here, namely institutionalized licence, occurs independently in widely different societies, and, hence, merits closer attention. More precisely, we shall deal with the incidence of well-defined, cyclical periods of institutionalized (and often ritualized) departure from the normative system of a given society. This departure from the usual norms may range from a simple relaxation of these norms, to their complete neglect or rejection, all the way to their deliberate reversal. The norms affected center generally around one or both of the following: relations between the sexes (or norms defining the sexual roles), and relations between persons of unequal status (or norms defining roles of command and obedience).

We must make clear at the onset that we are not dealing with deviant groups such as orgiastic sects or egalitarian movements which deliberately intend to reform or change the dominant society where they live. Equally outside the scope of this study are “joking relationships”. This type of behaviour is also a form of institutionalized licence and is, hence, akin to our present concern, but it operates within dyadic relationships and is not a collective phenomenon. Furthermore, joking relationships do not possess an exceptional character within a society. They are simply one of the modes of behaviour regulating at all times intercourse between specified relatives, and are thus analogous to their opposite, namely “avoidance relationships”. In a given society joking is permissible to anybody at any time, provided Ego stands in a given kinship position in relation to Alter. Our

1. The germinal idea for this paper was suggested in lecture by G. Balandier to whom I want to express my debt. The responsibility for the views expressed here is entirely my own, however.

2. Joking relationships could, however, be submitted to a kind of analysis similar to the one I am presenting here. Radcliffe-Brown views them as a socialized mechanism of tension-release. Kinship relations, he says, are intrinsically ambivalent and the resulting “social disjunction” can be resolved either
concern is with societies which sanction or demand, during limited and regular intervals, forms of collective behaviour that are exceptional and that would be condemned during most of the time.

The most obvious interpretation of such phenomena of institutionalized licence is in terms of safety devices to “blow off steam”, or, in more sophisticated words, of ritualized “sociodramas” with a tension-release function. While this view seems plausible at the psychological level, the explanation is certainly not exhaustive and there is need to analyze these facts further. Let us try to formulate the problem more systematically in the form of an hypothesis.

Certain norms, particularly those concerned with sex and authority, are of strategic value in maintaining the existing state of a society. Such norms may even be considered as prerequisites to the existence of any kind of society at all, for it is difficult to conceive a social system where sex and authority would be unregulated. At the same time, these norms generate tension and conflict, and, through their internal dialectic, threaten the system which they purport to maintain. The temporary and periodic relaxation, lifting or reversal of these norms, paradoxically contributes, in part through the mechanism of tension-release, to the stability of the normative system.  

So far we have simply rephrased more explicitly the “blowing-off-steam” hypothesis. But we must try to go somewhat further, for the function of institutionalized licence seems more complex. Insofar as such licence is often highly ritualized and takes place during great festivals, it reaffirms what Durkheim called the conscience collective. More particularly it reaffirms other norms (such as egalitarianism, good-fellowship, etc.) which are also valued in the society, but which stand in an antithetical relationship to the norms that are temporarily lifted or relaxed. The role of institutionalized licence is thus not only


3. Max Gluckman who deals at length with what he calls “rituals of rebellion or reversal” arrives at a similar dialectical formulation. He writes: “These rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order. Yet they are intended to preserve and even to strengthen the established order”. Cf. Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1955, p. 109. In his account of “ritual obscenity”, Evans-Pritchard likewise concludes that this phenomenon is socially useful, although his statement is not in dialectic terms. He says that ritual obscenity canalizes emotion in periods of crisis, emphasizes the social value of the activity with which it is connected by withdrawing normal prohibitions, and rewards the workers where such obscenity is connected with strenuous labour. Cf. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Some Collective Expressions of Obscenity in Africa”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, LIX, pp. 311-331.
It also contributes positively to social solidarity by allowing the free expression of other norms and ties, that are otherwise held in check.

The period of licence must therefore not be viewed as anomie, first because it is itself subject to definite norms, and secondly because it stands in an essential dialectical relationship to the "usual" state of affairs. Societies where such tension-release mechanisms are found can more profitably be viewed as going through a normative cycle consisting of a long "normal" phase and a short "licentious" phase. The two phases stand reciprocally in the same antithetical relationship as the norms stressed in each phase. In these sharply differentiated phases, we find merely a special case of these pulsating cycles of collective life that Marcel Mauss so vividly described in relation to the Eskimo. The very contrast between the two phases of the cycle maintains the cohesion of the normative system.

Let us examine now some empirical evidence from Africa where the phenomenon has already been studied by a number of anthropologists, starting with cases from Southern Africa reported by Max Gluckman and Hilda Kuper. Gluckman analyzes two types of rituals of licence, the first dealing with sexual roles and the second with the structure of authority. In the old Zulu agricultural rites performed to propitiate the goddess Nomkubulwana at the time of planting, women behaved in a way that would have been severely condemned at other times. Normally, Zulu women must be decorous in public, may not approach cattle and do not participate in national life and rituals. But once a year, before starting their arduous agricultural labours, women were allowed and even encouraged to act as if they were men. Unmarried girls dressed in men's garments, carried shields and spears, drove cattle to pasture and milked cows. At various stages of the ceremony, women and girls went naked and sang lewd songs while the men withdrew from all ritual participation and hid inside the huts. Gluckman mentions similar acts of licence by women in neighbouring Bantu groups. Tembu women behaved lewdly when celebrating a girl's puberty; Tsonga women go naked, sing lewd songs and maltreat any man they meet when they try to get rid of a crop-pest. These obscene and domineering acts are encouraged because they are believed to achieve a blessing for the community. In the Tsonga fertility rituals accompanying the choice of a new site for a village, the latent conflicts between men and women are emphasized, men sing obscene songs and


5. Cf. Gluckman, "Zulu Women" and *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. 
insult women, and the latter retaliate by uttering obscenities at the
men’s expense. After a month of taboo on sexual intercourse, all couples
have ritual sex relations when the new site is ready for occupation.

Another type of institutionalized licence examined by Gluckman
concerns what he calls “rituals of rebellion” among the Zulu where the
ritual has disappeared, and among the closely related Swazi described
by Kuper.6 In her masterful account of the great annual “drama of
kingship” known as Incwala among the Swazi, Kuper tells how the
ambivalence and rivalries centering around royal authority in this
highly hierarchized and status-conscious society are expressed in ritual.
This great national ritual, lasting a week and ending in feasting and
love-making, is recognized by the Swazi as cementing the solidarity
of all Swazi and strengthening the kingship. Kuper writes: “The
Incwala unites the people under the king, and at present there is a
fairly general appreciation of its nationalizing value. ‘We see that we
are all Swazi; we are joined against outside foes’.7

Yet the Incwala also brings to the fore the latent conflicts generated
in Swazi society. Some of these conflicts are not allowed to find a
ritual expression and are prevented from becoming overt. For
example, the men are supposed to carry sticks instead of the usual
spears to avoid bloodshed and fighting which might result from the
excitement of the occasion. Councillors are entrusted with keeping
discipline, and, when a fight broke out in 1938, King Sobhuza inter-
vened personally to stop it. Other tensions, rivalries and ambivalent
sentiments are, however, clearly and explicitly ritualized. In a series
of highly stereotyped songs, the Swazi tell their king that he is hated
and rejected. The male members of the royal clan surround the king
with the army behind them and threaten him with desertion. Kuper
writes: “The fourth day is the great day . . . On this day the king
appears in all his splendour, and the ambivalent attitude of love and
hate felt by his brothers and by his non-related subjects to him and to
each other is dramatized.”

Gluckman goes perhaps too far when he speaks of a “rebellion
ritual”, for the general tone of the Incwala is neither defiant nor
rebellious. Kuper describes the dominant tone in the following
terms: “. . . the women weep and the song of hate rings out with
penetrating melancholy”9, and “The actual words of the song are few,
mournful and tremendously moving”.10 When asked why the women
wept the queen-mother replied: “It is pain to see him a king. My

6. Cf. Gluckman, Rituals of Rebellion and Custom and Conflict in Africa; and
Kuper, op. cit., pp. 197-225.
child goes alone through the people.”  


12 Ibid.

Others answered: “We pity him . . . The work of a king is indeed heavy”.  

13 Kuper, op. cit., p. 221.

Nevertheless, the feelings expressed are undoubtedly of ambivalence, and, on the part of the princes, of rivalry and jealousy. Another interesting feature of the *Incwala* is that it grows with the king. “During the minority of a king the *Incwala* is slowly being developed, and as he grows to maturity the ritual increases in potency”.  


In other words, the ritual expression of hostility increases with the strength of the king.

Nadel provides us with a detailed description of another African example of institutionalized licence, totally independent of the facts examined so far.  

He deals with the *navu* festival celebrated by the Islamized Nupe of Nigeria. The *navu* is a Nupe reinterpretation of the Muslim New Year (*Muharram*), but its elements of licence are not traceable to Islam. The *navu* is predominantly a festival of youth and the exceptional behaviour allowed on this occasion is confined to young people. The Muslim New Year is the climax of the public appearances of the Nupe age sets (*ena*) representing the three different sections of the town of Bida studied by Nadel.  

A torch procession goes at night to the river, where boys and girls undress and bathe together in great merriment. The youths engage in openly erotic horseplay and couples disappear in the dark of the river-banks. The exceptional character of these activities is stressed by Nadel: “The *navu* is, in fact, the only occasion on which I have seen the Nupe indulge in open, undisguised sexual play”.  

Elsewhere he adds: “This is indeed unique; at no other time will Nupe girls disrobe in presence of men or show themselves with bare breasts.”

The licence on the night of *navu* is not confined to sexual behaviour. Until the British Government intervened around 1920, the *navu* was also the occasion for the violent expression of aggressivity and rivalry between the groups of youths representing the various sections of town. Heated faction fights invariably broke out with the use of deadly weapons, and resulted in numerous casualties. Injuries and death resulting from these fights went unpunished “for on this one night the law of the land was suspended”. Nadel continues with his interpretation of the phenomenon:

“In spite of its realism, however, the mock battle not only legitimized factional hostility but also diverted it into relatively harmless channels. For though
boys and youths would give vent to sentiments commonly felt, they themselves were still outside serious politics, and not yet genuinely caught up in factional strife . . . For the population of the city . . . this was in the nature of a vicarious and controlled catharsis of tension grown over the year; for the young fighters, it was the climax of age-grade life and a seal set to this ‘education for citizenship’.18

There is yet a third field in which the navu allows exceptional freedom of behaviour. On the day following the navu, children and youths play practical jokes on their elders of the same, or often of opposite sex. They playfully beat them or tie them and exact a small ransom in money. This is not a generalized phenomenon. It operates within the framework of customary “joking relationships” linking certain relatives, but it constitutes a further relaxation of normally permissible joking.

To conclude with this sketchy review of African evidence, we shall mention briefly a few of the cases of “ritual obscenity” collected from the literature by Evans-Pritchard and Palau-Marti.19 Traditional obscene songs are sung by the Ila of Northern Rhodesia on various occasions, particularly at annual feasts to honour ancestral spirits (makubi). Dancing, lewd singing and general licence takes place, and no complaint can be made for damage, theft or adultery.20 Obscenity rituals connected with funerals are found among the Zande of the Sudan. The feast of gamu among the Wolof of Senegal is described as one where “. . . très adroitement, on y dépeint avec ironie les défauts des rois et des grands”.21 Among the Dogon, the harvest of a certain plant (pó) is conducted in an atmosphere of “impudeur inaccoutumée”.22 Evans-Pritchard also reports institutionalized obscenity connected with “magico-religious ceremonies” (initiation, crop protection, funerals, rain, etc.) among the Kamba, Lango, Didinga, Lugbara and Ingassana.23

Space limitations prevent us from reviewing cases from other parts of the world as we have done for Africa. One example from Polynesia will serve, however, to indicate the wider distribution of institutionalized licence. On Society Island in Central Polynesia there exists a specialized association of men and women known as arioi which performs a number of licentious acts.24 The arioi is not a deviant group

in rebellion against its society. On the contrary, it is a sacred group connected mystically with the god of war, Oro, and entrusted with important ritual functions such as transmitting cosmogonic legends and invoking the gods to obtain fertility. The main and most valued purpose of the arioi seems to be entertainment, however, and the population at large supports the performers on their “theatrical tours”. Williamson gives the following account of the members’ activities:

“They wandered about the islands presenting performances for the delectation of the populace at large. . . . In these performances they were allowed to ridicule chiefs and other people of high rank with impunity. Many of their performances were, from European standards, extremely obscene, and free sexual practices were associated with their activities.”

This Polynesian example does not fall strictly within the assigned scope of this paper, since there is no indication that the activities of the arioi are limited to a particular period, and consequently one cannot speak of time cycles. Nevertheless this case is analogous to the African examples in that we find, once again, collective and ritually-based licentious acts centering around sexual norms and authority.

The evidence examined so far has dealt with non-literate societies, although institutionalized licence is by no means confined to them. Gluckman cites the examples of officers serving on the enlisted men at Christmas in certain British military units, and of certain Polish synagogues where a wastrel preached once a year a sermon attacking the Rabbi. The “trick or treat” of American children at Halloween would be another illustration. Let us turn in conclusion to a more detailed analysis of Carnival in Western culture, more particularly in the Rhineland. We shall deal mostly with a small town located on a tributary of the Rhine with which I am most familiar. In all essential respects, however, Carnival (Karneval) is celebrated in a similar way elsewhere in Germany, mostly in the Rhineland and Bavaria where the festivities are most elaborate. Although today Carnival has become completely secularized, its religious origin is obvious since it precedes Lent. One may speak here of a three-phase normative cycle in which Carnival is the thesis, Lent the antithesis, and the rest of the year the synthesis. Carnival, the period of extraordinary licence and hedonism reaches its climax on the eve of Aschermittwoch, and so maximizes the contrast with Lent, the period of unusual asceticism and austerity. During the rest of the year, a “happy medium” is maintained between the two extremes.

The German Carnival festivities begin on the 11th day of the 11th month (November) at 11:11 p.m., because eleven is considered a

“madmen’s number” (Narrenzahl). A jury of 11 people from the town elects a Carnival Prince and Princess who are addressed by the title of “His Madness” and “Her Loveliness” (Seine Tollität and Ihre Liebllichkeit). They must “swing the sceptre of madness” (Das Zepter der Narheit schwingen) and must see to it that everybody has as mad and joyful a time as possible. During the four on five months of Carnival, a series of public and private gatherings succeed one another and reach a crescendo during the week preceding Lent. These parties include dances, singing, humorous speech- and sketch-making and abundant drinking, mostly of beer and wine. One attends them in funny disguise and sometimes masked.

The dominant spirit of Carnival is the relaxation of practically all standards of behaviour. This licence includes several aspects: hedonism, rowdiness, irresponsibility, and the crumbling of class, age and hierarchical barriers. Drunkenness and rowdiness are viewed much more leniently than during the rest of the year, and even the police is expected to show indulgence. Indeed, sobriety at Carnival functions is distinctly frowned upon. The normally rather puritanical norms of sexual behaviour are likewise very much relaxed. Women often dress in costumes that would be regarded as indecent at other times. Public kissing between men and women, which is rare and frowned upon during the rest of the year, is quite uninhibited then, even between persons who hardly know one another. Obscene jokes are told quite freely in mixed company. Husbands and wives often attend these gatherings separately without the least censure. Pre-marital and extra-marital affairs are certainly much more common during Carnival than at other times, and the game of wife-swapping is practiced by a number of couples. Irresponsible, carefree, uninhibited behaviour is encouraged within the limits of “good fun”.

Apart from the hedonistic component of Carnival, its function as a social leveler is of great importance. It is doubtful that social stratification in Germany is any more rigid than in other industrialized Western countries, but class consciousness and the outward symbols of hierarchical differences are probably still more pronounced than elsewhere. The licence of Carnival time is, therefore, in sharp contrast with usual behaviour. Whereas, in “normal” life, differences in age, rank or social class are marked, on the part of the inferior, by great deference in speech, forms of address and other rules of etiquette, egalitarian familiarity is the rule during Carnival. The use of titles, so dear to the Germans, is completely dropped, and everybody may address anybody in the second person singular (Du), the supreme mark of familiarity and intimacy at other times. In humorous public speech-making, anybody may be ridiculed by means of more or less transparent allusions and with little restraint, no matter how exalted.
his position. Pompous and boring orators are quickly and vehemently shouted down and made to relinquish the podium. People of all ages and of all social classes participate quite freely in the Carnival and rub elbows in terms of nearly complete familiarity. Any show of being offended is regarded as a sign of bad taste, or at least of poor sportsmanship.

In the above description I have somewhat exaggerated the amount of licence that actually takes place. I have rather stretched the limits of permissible behaviour. In fact, of course, the usual norms of German society, as well as elementary considerations of personal caution, exert an inhibitory influence on Carnival behaviour. Furthermore, as the festivities can stretch over nearly half of the year, the relaxation of norms applies, not to the whole period, but mostly to the members of festive gatherings on the premises where the reunion is held, and to the last climaxing days of Carnival.

The few cases examined in this paper are by no means exhaustive, but they will allow us to push the theoretical analysis a step further. Let us first summarize what they teach us. All the societies treated here institutionalize some degree of licence in the fields of either sex or authority, and these two forms of licence are often closely linked. The Nupe permit, in addition, the expression of factional hostility. The institutionalization of sectional rivalry through mock battles, competitive team sports, electoral campaigns, etc. is, of course, also a widespread phenomenon, and seems akin to other forms of licence, although I had not considered it at the outset. The cases examined are all connected with ritual, even though the German Carnival is now secularized. Unusual though licentious behaviour is, it is clearly not deviant, since it is sanctioned by religion, fully expected or even positively encouraged, and never punished.

At the same time, licentious acts do not take place in an anarchic or anomic way. They are themselves subject to definite norms and contained within safe bounds. A time limitation is frequent, but not necessary as I implied at the beginning when I spoke of cycles. The Polynesian case does not seem to be qualitatively different from the others in spite of its absence of time limits, and in the case of Carnival, the time limits are very broad. The categories of direct participants may be restricted as in the Nupe and Polynesian case. In every instance, the ways in which licence is expressed are always highly stereotyped. In the extreme case of the Swazi *Incwala* songs, the expression of "licence" is acquired through lengthy learning. Paradoxically, then, this stereotyped licence seems to give the individual little more "freedom" than in his usual behaviour. In short, all the cases examined present a number of basic elements in common, despite their great diversity of detail.

The common elements just stressed, point to important structural
similarities which underline historical specificities. Our initial dialectical formulation seems to hold in the light of the facts. This formulation is not the result of any preconceived ideological position but of the type of phenomena studied. We must now try to refine the analysis. Gluckman, Kuper, Evans-Pritchard and Nadel arrive at much the same interpretation as myself in that they all consider, implicitly or explicitly, the channeled expression of licence as conducive to normative stability and to a strengthening of social solidarity. In the political context, Gluckman rightly distinguishes “rebels” from “revolutionaries”, i.e. those who oppose individual rulers while accepting the system from those who oppose the system. Only the latter are deviants, and phenomena of ritualized conflict and licence are antithetical to phenomena of revolutionary conflict and deviance, in spite of superficial similarities.

Gluckman pushes his argument further: “... the licenced ritual of protest and of rebellion is effective so long as there is no querying of the order within which the ritual of protest is set...” Conversely, in societies where there is widespread questioning of the normative order, rituals of licence are a dangerous luxury which may turn into the opposite of its intended purpose. Hence such rituals are not found prominently in Western societies according to Gluckman. While I agree basically with Gluckman, I believe that he stresses he antinomy somewhat too far. Rituals of licence are indeed found prominently in Western societies as we have seen. Nevertheless they entail a definite risk as Gluckman rightly suggests. If one interprets electoral campaigns as “rituals of aggression”, for example, it is clear that the democratic system can only operate satisfactorily to the extent that all major contesting parties accept the “rules of the game”, and agree broadly on the nature of the socially desirable. Otherwise the political “ritual” is used by extremist groups to undermine the system from within. Confirmation for the notion that institutionalized licence affirms the strength of the norms it violates can also be found in the Swazi case. The Incewala attains its plenitude only when the king has reached his maturity.

The facts examined above and their interpretation by Kuper, Nadel and Gluckman also support our initial formulation concerning the tension-release function of licence. The authors all accept that rituals of licence may, and probably do, fulfill such a function, either directly for the participants or vicariously for the spectators, but they refuse to fall into any simplistic psychological reductionism. Apart from the general pitfalls of predominantly psychological explanations of collective phenomena, the purely tension-release interpretation would

27. Gluckman, Rituals of Rebellion, p. 130.
encounter more specific difficulties. Why, for instance, does Carnival precede Lent rather than follow it, as one would expect if one held to a strict tension-release view? The same question can be raised about the Zulu agricultural rites where licence for women precedes the phase of arduous labour in the fields.

The empirical material leads us back to our original hypothesis, namely that institutionalized licence must be viewed primarily as one of the important social mechanisms to reconcile inherent normative contradictions, and to consolidate the normative structure. This statement does not deny that ritual licence also fulfills a cathartic function, but rather emphasizes its norm-reinforcing function and the necessity to view the latter in a dialectical light. Norms regulating authority, sex, and internal aggression are so basic to any society that they may be accepted as “functional prerequisites”. At the same time, there is an imposing mass of evidence from psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, small group studies and anthropology that these very norms generate tensions that threaten to disrupt the system to which they are indispensable.

Institutionalized licence is a relatively safe way, not only of “draining” these tensions, but of reaffirming by contrast and by its exceptional nature, the norms that are temporarily relaxed or reversed. The mechanism is safe to the extent that “licence” is carefully circumscribed and expresses itself in highly stereotyped acts leaving little more room for idiosyncratic expression than “normal” behaviour. This stereotypy is so developed that one may seriously question the appropriateness of the term “licence” in this context. None of the facts examined suggest in any way that licence is associated with a rejection of the usual norms. Not only does licence reaffirm norms by contrast, but it can also stress other antithetical norms (e.g. egalitarianism as opposed to authority) which are also valued, although they cannot be simultaneously implemented. Licence allows then the alternating emphasis of contradictory norms. Finally, insofar as licence is often associated with important religious rituals, it shares the functions of other great “collective manifestations”, to use Durkheim’s phraseology.

The phenomena studied in this paper are, I believe, of crucial theoretical importance, for they show the inadequacy of both the functionalist and the dialectical approach as complete general theories, and point to a mutual fertilization of the two theories. Indeed, institutionalized licence is a “frontier” phenomenon in that it grows from an intra-systemic dialectic as I have stressed many times here, but also contributes to “pattern-maintenance” and normative stability. If it can be shown that the dialectic is no more intrinsically dynamic than functionalism is inherently static, one of the false dichotomies opposing the two bodies of theory will have been resolved to their mutual benefit.