

SOCIAL-DRAMA THEORY AND POLITICAL CHANGE

Victor Turner, author of *The Anthropology of Performance*, defines social drama as “a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive, or agonistic type.” A social drama begins when a member of a group or community breaks a rule—a “breach.” After the initial shock, sides are taken for or against the rule breaker. Authorities then take action to repair the social order. If the repairs work, the group or community returns to normal. If the repairs fail, the group either breaks apart or the dissenting minority lives under conditions of stifling repression.

The American civil rights movement is a good example of social drama, starting with Rosa Parks’ refusal to sit at the back of a public bus. The next stage in this social drama was mass public demonstrations in support of civil rights. Then the United States federal government instituted some social changes in favour of civil rights, such as desegregation of schools (see page 456 of your textbook, re: Martin Luther King Jr.).

In his book *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner describes the stages of social drama as follows:

“In my book, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors* (pages 37-41) I define social dramas as units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations. Typically, they have four main phases of public action. These are: (1) *breach* of regular norm-governed social relations; (2) *crisis*, during which there is a tendency for the breach to widen. ... (3) *redressive action* ranging from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual. ... (4) the final phase consists either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of *irreparable schism* between the contesting parties.”

A summary of Turner’s social-drama theory:

- Breach—prompted by an act of defiance—is where the group is, metaphorically speaking, at a threshold, standing at a crossroads moment “betwixt and between” possibilities. At this stage, almost anything can happen, and the outcome usually cannot be predicted through rational foresight (e.g., the bloody repression that would follow the French Revolution).
- The crisis is where events take on a carnival-like atmosphere, as parades and marches publically express the jubilation of the demonstrators, still optimistic about their hopes of effecting change. (See page 457 of your textbook, re: gay pride parades)
- In a liberal democracy, redress comes about through incremental, legislative, and judicial reform, and through changes of policy at the executive levels of government that respond to the demands of the people. In a dictatorship, redress usually takes the form of repression: brutal suppression of dissent and denial of civil liberties such as freedom of assembly or of the press. Without the prospect of reform, more radical elements of society may turn to revolution, further dividing the country in civil war.
- Reintegration may be inclusive, as in welcoming the dissenters into the fold (e.g., women gaining the right to vote). It may also be achieved by intimidating, silencing, or “disappearing” the dissidents. In the latter case, a schism or rip in the social fabric remains, awaiting another time when it may resurface: for instance, another pro-democracy movement emerging in China or Iran.



BLM 16.2 Continued

Questions:

1. Can you see any similarities between the four stages of social drama and the transitions we undergo personally through maturation and life change (e.g., coming of age, marriage)? Explain your ideas.
2. Research one social-change movement in another country, either in the past or present. Apply the four stages of social drama to this movement. Present your ideas in a written format or other creative means of your choice.
3. Schools are fertile ground for social dramas, as rules are frequently broken, thus initiating responses from students, teachers, and administration. Apply the stages of Turner's model to a conflict at your school. Be mindful of how you report the actions of members in your school community.
4. How can art play a powerful political role in creating a breach, or *dissensus*, and, at the same time, produce overwhelming aesthetic and emotional experiences of the sublime? Describe one example. (See the following pages in your textbook for relevant information: 511 re: art and the sublime; 406 re: Fanon and Mandela; 505 re: Césaire; 533-534 re: protest art; 537 re: *Persepolis*.)
5. Illustrate the process of social drama, depicting its “betwixt and between” quality of potential for change, through collage, film, drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, skits, or dance. Propose your project idea to your teacher for approval and carry it out.

