Horror, dread, awe and disgust – revisiting Durkheim and place

Nick Osbaldiston
Queensland University of Technology
Email: n.osbaldiston@qut.edu.au

Theresa Petray
James Cook University

Abstract

This paper revisits the re-conceptualisation of the sacred/profane classification in the analysis of place undertaken by Smith (1999) in his *Elementary Forms of Place* model. Following long standing criticism about the ambiguity of Durkheim's (1995[1912]) delineation of the profane, Smith (1999) here proposes four typologies that specifically separate those places of no special significance, the mundane, from other sites of high or low value. The argument made in this paper is that despite the usefulness of this typology, Smith (1999) neglects the darker side of the sacred. Known as the impure or 'left' sacred (Hertz, 1960[1909]), this concept characterises those objects or in this case places which imbue feelings of horror and dread. Yet unlike the profane, these sites acquire no ritual avoidance strategies. This paper illustrates this darker side of the sacred through secondary empirical analysis from the World War One site of Gallipoli. It is found that while elements of the pure sacred are found within the rituals of ANZAC Day here, there is also a profound imagery of horror and dread. These we argue, help to further accentuate and concretise the pure sacred experience through narratives of sacrifice, patriotism and heroism.

Introduction

The intriguing role of the sacred in Emile Durkheim's (1995[1912]) *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter *Forms*) has recently been rediscovered within contemporary cultural analysis. This return to the spiritual paradigm of the *Année Sociologique* perhaps alleviates the well worn tag of functionalism that has hindered further exploration of Durkheim's theories (cf. Smith, 2008). More specifically, the re-imagining of the sacred/profane dichotomy within cultural sociology has created a theoretical opportunity for further insight into the cultural codes/narratives which construct the 'world's inner life' (Alexander 1998: 30). As Smith (2008: 20) has recently argued, these binary distinctions are 'imaginative templates' which 'enable

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societies to make sense of the world' by discerning the 'sacred from the profane, the pure from the polluted' or the good from the evil. Yet, despite its apparent strengths, a number of past criticisms highlight issues that require consideration when using the Durkheimian platform (cf. Lukes 1973; Evans-Pritchard 1960). These mainly focus on the ambiguity of the profane typology which is deemed as the non-social and everyday for Durkheim. Despite engaging with Robertson-Smith's discussion of the impure sacred briefly towards the end of *Forms*, this important theoretical point is left largely unattended.

Theoretical work post-*Forms* then often attempts to re-conceptualise the profane and the impure sacred as is illustrated in the subsequent writings of Mauss's students (Riley, 2005). Others too, such as Douglas (2002[1966]), have been continued on through this intellectual legacy. However of much interest to this paper is the re-imagining of the sacred/profane distinction proposed by Phil Smith (1999) in his work into place. While his *Elementary Forms of Place* model has garnered little interest amongst the wider social sciences, including cultural disciplines, it is argued here that this particular contribution to investigating place provides theoretical tools that reveal the processes and narratives which feed sites of special significance. In other words, places of sacred value, either secular or religious, can be revealed as a 'dramatic manipulation of symbolic forms' (Smith 1999: 21).

This paper however argues that Smith's (1999) typology suffers in its inability to conceptualise the sacred entirely with its neglect of the impure sacred. The *Forms of Place* model appears to characterise the profane similar to the darker or impure element of the sacred. This restricted view, it is argued here, fails to appreciate sites that imbue aesthetics of horror and dread without constructing a ritualistic need for avoidance as is characteristic of a profane place/object. Thus in the discussion below,

we argue that the impure sacred place needs conceptualising. Subsequently, we also argue that the profane place in Smith's (1999) typology requires further concretising. To achieve this, the paper will empirically engage with the two types and illustrate the role of the impure sacred in place. This will be achieved by examining secondary data (Scates 2006) from rituals performed at the World War One site of Gallipoli. It will be shown that elements of the impure are not only present but contribute to the pure sacred experience.

The elementary forms of place – profane worlds and sacred places

As mentioned previously, one of the theoretical shortfalls of *Forms* is the ambiguity of the profane which is left characteristic of the mundane by Durkheim (1995[1912]). For critics like Lukes (1973), distinguishing between what is an object of apparent disgust and the everyday is critically important. Smith (1999) follows this trend and subsequently constructs a typology that engages with this distinction. He proposes that there are four, 'and only four, elementary forms of place: sacred, profane, liminal and mundane' (Smith 1999: 16). The liminal place is of little importance to this present discussion. However, it should be noted that these places are essentially characterised by 'themes of absurdity' where 'quasi-ritualised carnivalesque, playful or grotesque forms of behaviour' abound (Smith 1999:20). Examples of this could include Las Vegas or a local brothel. Such places are distinct from the sacred and the profane (see below).

The major theoretical contribution Smith (1999) makes in this piece is the delineation of the mundane setting as opposed to the profane. It could be argued that his insights here could also translate into objects or material culture studies. Yet in relation to place, the mundane is the central figure of which the other typologies revolve around.

It is differentiated by its apparent lack of a 'special nature' (Smith 1999: 21). Thus, the mundane place is the default position, 'the entropy state of place' where sites of significance return when 'themes of ascent' or 'themes of descent' are loosed and no longer individualise the place. For this purpose, the city and its urban environs are definitive examples of the mundane because of its 'normality' and 'routine' ambience (Smith 1999: 21).

Having established the mundane place then, Smith (1999) is able to explore the profane in a direct and less ambiguous fashion. This he argues is situated within the bounds of the degrading and polluting (Douglas 2002[1966]) as illustrated here;

> Profane places are created from other types of place by means of mythical or real actions that are framed in terms of "themes of descent" (Frye, 1956) which transmit a stigma to their spatial location. These narratives see human actions as polluting to the moral fabric of society and degrading to human spiritual values. (Smith 1999: 19)

On one hand places denoted by these themes acquire ritualistic 'attempts at destruction' (Smith 1999: 19) as illustrated in the desire to tear down murderers' homes or places of moral disgust. Smith (1999: 20) discusses sites such as the Berlin Wall which 'represented one of the most potent symbols of Soviet and state oppression in Eastern Europe' to demonstrate this. This specific place became subject to a 'spontaneous ritual of mass destruction' when it fell in 1989. Alternatively, public reaction to profane places perhaps more frequently acquires a type of 'avoidance' strategy as Durkheim (1995[1912]) indicated in *Forms*. For instance, this is illustrated in issues of racial inequality in public sentiment towards the offshore Australian place of Palm Island.

Since 1999, Palm Island has been infamously known as the most violent place on earth outside of a combat zone (Guinness Book, 1999). Palm Island is also known for unemployment levels higher than 90%, an average of 17 people per house, and a life

expectancy of 50 years (Hooper 2008). More recently, this community has been rocked by the controversial death in custody in 2004, protests to that death, and the ensuing inquests and court cases which are still ongoing. For the majority of Australians, Palm Island acts as a very visible reminder or 'theme of descent' (Frye 1956) founded upon imageries and collective memories of violence and a racist history of settlement. Of course, the majority of the population is so far removed from Palm Island that it can easily distance itself from this place, but for people in North Queensland it is ever-present and decidedly profane[1].

Reactions to Palm Island are incredibly varied, but in North Queensland many people treat it with contempt. One Townsville police officer, while chatting about research on Palm Island, asked 'why would anyone want to go to *that place?*' Others say that it is a 'scary place', although they have never visited the island. The most extreme view, however, is typified by Peter Lindsay, Liberal MP for the Queensland seat of Herbert (which includes Palm Island): 'If the Indigenous leaders are not prepared to change the hopeless conditions that the community currently live in, then perhaps it's time to move them all to the mainland and integrate into mainstream Australia' (ABC News 6 Jan 2006). Rather than addressing the problems of inequality, the solution is to remove the community from that place. The profanity, then, exists in the relationship between the community and the place itself.

Therefore as illustrated here, the role of the profane in some settings constructs symbolic rituals of avoidance that impact on governance issues. In this respect, the communities that live amongst profane settings characterised by others as morally and socially degrading, have these avoidance strategies enforced upon them as was witnessed historically with other indigenous groups across Oceania. Returning back

however to the theoretical discussion, these illustrations make a clear and concrete distinction from sites of sacrality which guides the rest of this paper.

In contrast to the profane for Smith (1999), the sacred place is characterised by 'themes of ascent' (Frye 1956) which encourages feelings of awe, pride or quiet reverence. Behaviour and sentiment towards the sacred place is distinguished through formal ritualised activity or informally imposed ritualised transformations in the 'presentation of the self' (Goffman 1971). 'Micro-rituals of the body' intensify according to Smith (1999:19) as one nears the main focal point of the sacred place. In some cases as will be shown, this could include totems like monuments which define and signpost the place's historical sacredness. The hill of Golgotha or the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem represents obvious religious examples. However, these illustrate one type of sacred, namely the pure. This paper will now conclude by examining a site discerned by Smith (1999) as an example of the sacred place. Using Robert Hertz's (1960[1909]) discussion of the impure or 'left sacred', as he suggests in his work on the sinister 'left' hand, the paper concludes by arguing that there are indeed two types of sacrality present in certain places.

Within Australian culture, the World War One site of Gallipoli has recently accentuated its position as a sacred place for the wider collective. The area, commonly appreciated for the birth of the ANZAC spirit, has attracted a resurgence of visitors seeking to be amongst the site where 'what it meant (and means) to be Australian' is exemplified (Scates, 2006:xxii). While these journeys occur periodically, the annual commemorative event of ANZAC Day presents an opportunity for individuals to be involved in both a formal and informal ritual setting to remember the sacrifice of those past. Discourses which emerge from those involved in this event display a

'collective nostalgia' (Davis, 1979) for sacrifice, heroism and patriotism akin to the pure sacred. The following two quotations illustrate this;

> Very touching and everyone was balling there (sic) eyes out...Next came the Turkish national anthem, [and] the Aussie national anthem [again]...The whole crowd went mental and sung (sic) as loud as it could...I could not [begin] to describe the feeling of togetherness with the people there, real Aussie spirit (Scates, 2006: 192).
> The sun was starting to set, and the beach was bathed in a golden glow...the breeze picked up enough to take the flag out to full flight. It was then standing on North Beach, where all those years ago so many men had lost their lives under the flag that I was flying...that I finally felt like an Australian (Scates, 2006: 176).

The first of these citations above is indicative of the collective effervescence that the pure sacred produces. In this instance, there is a 'togetherness' or solidarity which is perceived as the 'Aussie spirit'. The work of ritual through the patriotic narratives and themes, sustains Gallipoli's higher status.

The second comment, which is illustrative of a number of discourses (cf. Scates 2006; Inglis 2005), reveals the more individualised reflection of the experience. 'Collective nostalgia' or remembering based on knowledge (history) passed on through generations serves in this instance to provoke feelings of respect, awe and finally a sense of patriotic pride and identity. Smith (1999) delineates this type of reflective behaviour and thought process as characteristic of a sacred place. Yet, the comment also shows a connection to the darker side of Gallipoli. The deaths of 'so many men' under the secular totem of Australia, the flag, reveals an insight into another symbolic world which impacts on the experience at Gallipoli that Smith (1999) misses.

The following three quotations from Scates's (2006) research illustrate this and prompt further theoretical discussion;

> The dawn service was sombre, dignified, and ghostly with the dawn lights throwing a soft sheen over the gently breaking sea. A morning you would imagine the Anzacs experienced only with starbursts of shell and rattle roar of machine gun. I [thought] of a quiet expectant death on a lapping shore (Scates, 2006: 188).

> Anzac cove is...strange. It is so beautiful, the water is clear, and still, and it is just so peaceful. It's hard to believe that anything so horrible could've happened here...We visited the tiny cemeteries, tens of them, as soon as you think that's all there could possibly be, there are more, dotted all over...the ravines...it was pure massacre (Scates, 2006: 175).
> Not all the dead rest peacefully. At the Nek and Chunuk Bair, 'Alice' complained of something 'eerie', the 'smell, the adrenalin, sweat, blood, tears' seemed to seep through the landscape,' sent goose bumps up my spine'...Others relived the trauma of those long dead soldiers. 'I believe I was there in another life', one man told me, 'I felt naked and vulnerable [on the battlefields]. I found myself clinging, trembling. It was horrible...' (Scates, 2006: 118).

In all three instances, the symbolism of the area imbues imagery of death, horror and massacre. In later discourses from the study, Scates (2006) reveals that the serious contemplation of the past terrors of the battlefield is a common occurrence. These notions are not resemblant of the awe, inspiration and value that reflect the pure sacred.

Themes of this nature (horror and dread) cannot simply be viewed as the profane, either. They are not ritually avoided nor destroyed, a fundamental characteristic of the profane as illustrated above. Rather, this type of narrative represents the other side of the sacred, defined by a 'certain horror in religious respect' (Durkheim 1995[1912] p.413). Hertz (1960[1909]:94)[2] provides this clear description;

> Supernatural powers are not all of the same order: some work in harmony with the nature of things, and inspire veneration and confidence by their regularity and majesty; others, on the contrary, violate and disturb the order of the universe, and the respect they impose is founded chiefly on aversion and fear.

This 'social polarity' (Hertz 1960[1909]: 96) between that which promotes harmony and that which promotes collective fear and discomfort is experienced in the rituals at Gallipoli. On one side, activities such as the dawn service invoke a collective effervescence for national spirit or patriotism while on the other it can also promote an imagery of death and horror. The same place, it would appear, passes from one pole of the sacred to the other, something Durkheim (1995[1912]: 415) concludes as

the ambiguity of the sacred. Yet, similar to Hertz's (1960[1909]) analysis of the left and right hand, these antagonistic relationships actually compliment rather than degrade. We argue here that the horror and dread of the Gallipoli experience actually sustains and accentuates the respect and patriotic pride felt through pure sacred rituals. Smith (1999:17-18) reflects on this notion without ever contemplating the impure when he suggests that the 'sacrifice of lives' which enabled 'evil nations to be defeated' assists in the sacralisation of World War One sites. Our argument however is that the more stark and heightened the symbolism of this 'sacrifice' is the more valued the resulting pure sacred experience. The overwhelming aesthetics of Gallipoli which is symbolic of the impure sustains and accentuates notions of heroism and patriotic duty thus serving feelings of awe, respect and pride. Similar notions are demonstrated in other war memorial sites and also within contemporary spaces such as the Flight 93 (Riley 2008) commemorative site where courage and patriotism is underpinned by horrific death and destruction.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to briefly revisit the 'Elementary Forms of Place' model provided by Smith (1999) and consider the sacred typology more closely with relation to the profane and the impure/pure distinction provided by Durkheim's co-collaborators. By investigating empirically the theoretical typology provided by Smith (1999), it was revealed that the profane is indeed a place for ritual avoidance in contemporary culture. However, it was also revealed that within Smith's (1999) discussion on the sacred, the two opposing poles of the pure and impure are ignored. While one hinges on the awe, respect and collective effervescence that is imbued for Durkheim (1995[1912]) through ritual experiences with the sacred, the other

symbolises horror, dread and in some cases death. Using empirical evidence from secondary data on ritual discourse at Gallipoli, it was shown through Hertz's (1960[1909]) discussion that both the pure and impure sacred exists in that place. However, rather than existing in an antagonistic relationship, the impure serves to compliment the pure. For well defined symbolisms of horror and dread assist in accentuating narratives of sacrifice that underpin the sacred experience. Admittedly, this theoretical discussion above has been brief and simplistic. However, it is argued here that similar insights can also be drawn when other places such as the World Trade Centre memorial, the Flight 93 crash site and Golgotha are examined closely.

Notes

1   While this paper discusses Palm Island as a profane place according to most Australians, it has a very different role for Aboriginal people and their supporters, acting as a source of pride and authenticity (*Reference Removed as Identifies Author*); in some respects, it operates as an impure sacred space for many Aboriginal people.

2   It should be noted here that although Evans-Pritchard (1960) who introduces Hertz's (1960[1909]) English translation here argues that the separation he makes is based purely on the profane/sacred binary rather than the dual nature of the sacred, this paper disagrees (as does Riley, 2005) when one considers the treatment of the corpse theoretically by Hertz. As Riley (2005: 281) also suggests, the profane was for the Durkheimians a 'non-social' object/thing as opposed to the manner the dead body was ritually dealt with in Hertz's analysis.

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