MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING?
RITUALS OF POLITICS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE
AND TODAY
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I. Much Ado About Nothing? A Ritual Mistake

Many people will remember Barack Obama’s being sworn into office as the 44th President of the United States on January 20, 2009, by placing his right hand upon Lincoln’s bible and repeating the words spoken to him by Chief Justice John Roberts:

I, Barack Hussein Obama, do solemnly swear that I will execute the office of President of the United States faithfully and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. — So help me God.

And with this, the 44th President of the United States was called into existence (see Fig. 1). Or was he? As Americans, of course, know much better than I — although the German press also followed this carefully — Chief Justice Roberts jumbled the words. The oath’s actual line in the Constitution reads, “I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States.”

One might imagine that this was not a truly serious problem, for Obama did in any case promise to execute his office “faithfully,” whether the adverb was placed before or after the verb. But in the blogosphere, a debate arose immediately about whether Obama was now, in fact, actually president. And even if many would like to see these doubts as “paranoid,” the administration wanted to be on the safe side and to preclude the possibility that anyone might use the mistake as an opportunity to challenge the act’s legitimacy. As is well known, Justice Roberts had Obama repeat the oath in the White House the following day, this time without any great publicity and without any mistakes in the word order. Only now was Obama unequivocally president.

In Europe — and presumably here as well — the episode caused much shaking of heads. Something like this is generally more familiar from the early Middle Ages: Then, too, it could be quite dangerous
to make a mistake in a ritual. A judgment was invalid if the judge did not cross his legs properly during the trial. And the missal sacrifice was invalid if the priest did not correctly utter the words of consecration. Clearing one’s throat, coughing, or stumbling could nullify the effect of the entire ritual. Legal historians refer to this as archaic-magical formalism – and it seems astonishing and disconcerting that it could still play a role in the present day. The general reaction is to see this as “Much Ado About Nothing.”

The episode is certainly a borderline case. Even if he had not repeated the oath, Obama would surely have been recognized as president by 99.9 percent of all U.S. citizens. But the story is nonetheless revealing and is eminently suited to a discussion of questions about what rituals are, how they function, and how rituals today differ from those of premodern eras. The episode not only teaches us that rituals must be carefully practiced, but gives us important insight into rituals in general, which can be understood as a kind of “social magic.”

I will develop my argument in three steps: First, I will discuss what a ritual is and in which sense I will use the word. Second, I will illustrate the functioning of a political ritual with an example from the early modern era, namely, the ritual of enfeoffment or investiture of an Imperial prince in the Holy Roman Empire. Third and finally, I will compare this to political rituals today and will ask if there are significant similarities and differences.

II. What Is a Ritual?

There are at least as many different definitions of the term “ritual” as there are scholarly disciplines that study ritual phenomena. Though...
they can be debated at length, definitions are not actually truths, but merely tools used to distinguish and arrange phenomena. My suggestion for a definition would be as follows:

A ritual is a specific kind of act or sequence of acts with several actors and several defining characteristics: First of all, it is repetitive and standardized in its outward form. This means that there are specific conventions concerning the formal “correctness” of the gestures, words, actors, and context. This is the essence of what constitutes a ritual: it is repetitive and, therefore, recognizable. Every kind of ritualization releases its participants from having to choose from an infinity of possible acts, thus creating a certain reliability of expectations. The way in which the forms are normalized can vary; it can be a matter of unspoken expectation or of written codification. But, when examined closely, formalization does not mean rigidity and immutability. While the forms inherently require a certain constancy – ultimately this is the whole point of rituals – they can also be changed in their details at the actors’ disposal. Rituals are shaped quite consciously, even if this is generally disguised, and they appear as if they were immovable.

Second: Rituals do not merely say something; they do something. They are efficacious in the sense that they bring about a change of – social, political, spiritual, etc. – state or condition. They create a break between two situations that would otherwise merge seamlessly into one another. Rituals have a performative character. They bring about what they represent. (For example, the mere act of saying “yes” effects marriage in certain, specific circumstances, with all the social, legal and psychological consequences that entails.) This is precisely what Pierre Bourdieu means when he applies the term “social magic” to rituals. By effecting change and marking breaks, rituals generate the distinctions that are important to a society (for example, the distinctions between war and peace, youth and adulthood, baptized and unbaptized persons or authorities and subjects), and they oblige all participants to adhere to these distinctions in the future.

Third: Rituals are staged or enacted demonstratively. Indeed, they must be to effectively mark and bring about change. The English word “to enact” is very significant here because it not only means to stage but also to sanction. Rituals are elevated above the course of everyday acts and symbolically denoted as such, for example, by the actors’ clothing and attributes, by marking the place, by signs for the beginning and end, music, and verbal formulas. It is not possible to

perform a ritual accidentally. Rituals follow an explicit intention and are executed consciously, publicly, demonstratively, and solemnly; they are performed on a stage, in a certain frame (in the literal or figurative sense).

These three essential features of rituals are given expression by the old term *solemnis*, solemnity (“I solemnly swear”): In the ancient Roman Empire, *actus solemnes* were originally acts that were publicly celebrated in the same way once a year (*solus annus*) with a strict formality and a binding character. The same is true of rituals: They are characterized by strict adherence to forms, repetition, and obligation.

Fourth: Rituals are symbolic in that they point to something beyond themselves and evoke a greater context of order, which they symbolize and simultaneously reinforce (this distinguishes them from mere individual routines). The central requisites are symbolically charged, such as Lincoln’s bible at the U.S. presidential inauguration, for example. This is an important point: Rituals do not function without preconditions. The conventions of a ritual derive their validity only from a larger context of order. Among other things this context authorizes the persons as able to correctly perform the ritual. Because they are performed in specific, repeatable, solemn forms, they place the individual act – and the individual actors – within a larger context and connect act and actors to the past or to a mythical or historical origin. And, as a rule, they also connect this world to the next, and thus have a sacrificial and transcendental character in the stricter sense.

Rituals thus create structure and continuity – and do so in a way that transcends the change of individual actors. When someone is solemnly installed in office by being publicly clothed in special garments before witnesses, given the traditional insignia, made to swear a formalized oath (as in our opening example), and seated upon a specific chair, this changes the status of this person and also commits him to specific behavior in the future. But at the same time, and even more importantly, the order into which the person is installed remains the same, and its fundamental values, categories of order, and distinctions are reinforced. Rituals thus create a certain reliability of expectation. They bridge precisely the sensitive “neuralgic” points in the life of an individual or a society as a whole and consolidate institutional orders. And, paradoxically, this remains true even when rituals do not actually remain the same but merely seem so to the actors. What is essential is that rituals point beyond themselves,
symbolically transcend the present moment and place it in a larger – possibly a cosmic – context. In the case of Obama’s inauguration, it is not only the change of the person in office that is carried out; much more importantly, the constitutional order itself – its past, its highest entities with the Chief Justice at the head, its leading values, and ultimately its protection under God – is evoked and staged in a symbolically condensed manner in this ritual.

Rituals not only make continuity and change – structure in general – symbolically visible, but they also tend to generate the associated feelings, such as feelings of belonging, obligation, dignity, and even shame. One might say that rituals function like a kind of collective contagion. Of course, this is not necessarily so. But even when rituals do not truly produce the appropriate feelings and the inward attitude in all participants, this is by no means crucial. The salient point with rituals is precisely that what matters for the ritual to be valid is the outward visibility, the correct external performance. This is exactly what the story of the slip-up in Obama’s oath formula illustrates: The essential thing is what is shown correctly in an outwardly visible way. It is this to which one commits oneself in the ritual, in front of the others present as witnesses. Whether one later breaks this commitment is a different matter. Of course, the ritual itself cannot force the participants to comply with the commitments it enacts. But it does cause all participants to expect compliance, an expectation that becomes the premise for future action. To stay with our example, whether President Obama will in fact execute his office “faithfully” and “to the best of his ability” is certainly not dependent upon whether he placed the adverb properly in his oath. But the correct execution of the ritual ensures that he is accepted as the president by all, and that no one can really dispute this without being considered crazy.

This is what I mean by social magic: A ritual brings about what it represents; it transforms reality in the sense that it reciprocally changes the expectations of the participants. This is particularly true of political rituals. Political power always requires visibility. Although objective means of power are necessary, they are not sufficient. For political power is not a possession or a quality but a relation between people. Someone has power only if the others know this, attribute it to him, expect and believe it. Even the reputation of power is power, as Thomas Hobbes perceptively noted in *Leviathan*. Public political rituals normally generate a collective belief that power exists, that institutional roles determine who possesses it and, above all, that

these persons possess it legitimately. As a historian more familiar with early modern European history than modern American history, I would like to elucidate this using an historical example.

III. Rituals in the Premodern Age: The Example of Feudal Investiture in the Holy Roman Empire

Premodern European history is filled with rituals of rulership; in monarchies as well as in republics, there were royal coronations or changes of republican councils, investitures and homages, court days and assemblies of the estates of the realm. The swearing of oaths was almost always at the center of these acts and took place on all levels of the hierarchical order, holding the entire society together by justifying and limiting rule. The royal coronation oath at the head of the hierarchy formed only “the heart of an interwoven system of rulership contracts.”

I will single out one of these rituals of installation as an example, namely the solemn investiture or enfeoffment by the Emperor, through which the princes in the Holy Roman Empire from about the fourteenth century received the transfer of their fief and thus their right to rule over their hereditary territories. I will introduce this ritual in its ideal-typical form in order to then briefly sketch how it changed over time.

From the late Middle Ages, the investiture of Imperial princes took place as a great solemn spectacle whenever Emperor and Imperial princes met together publicly in ceremonial form, that is, on the occasion of solemn court and Imperial diets. In the open air, on a central square in an Imperial city, a scaffold was built expressly for this purpose, adorned with a canopy and magnificently decorated with the Imperial eagle (see Fig. 2).

There, the Emperor appeared “in his majesty,” that is, in Imperial vestments and accompanied by the prince-electors (or at least their representatives), who positioned themselves around him “in their
right order” and held the Imperial insignia at the ready. They did this in accordance with the ceremonial script of the Golden Bull, the most fundamental ordinance of the Empire. Contemporary sources always refer to the presence of a giant crowd of spectators. The recipient of the investiture appeared with high-ranking relatives as advocates and had hundreds of horsemen in his retinue, all with banners and clothing in the colors of their lord. The greater the jostling in the streets of the city, the more admiringly the sources always describe the thoroughly harmonious order of the “mighty host” whose followers arranged themselves in formation according to a strictly hierarchical choreography. The ritual began with the retinue riding in a gallop around the Imperial throne three times (the so-called *ritus circumequitandi*, first mentioned in 1417). To contemporary spectators it was clear that this enacted the vassal’s military might – as in a tournament: hundreds of horsemen, all well-practiced noble soldiers with their pennants, rallied around the one red banner as was usually done on the battlefield. Finally, as intercessors, the vassal’s closest friends and relatives, kneeling three times, presented the formal request of investiture to the Emperor (first documented in 1436 at the election and coronation of Maximilian). The latter then conducted a short ritual dialogue with the electors to show that he ruled according to their consent. Only then did the vassal himself enter the picture, kneel in turn three times before the Imperial throne and present the Emperor with his feudal banners – one for each of his territories, each bearing the appropriate coat of arms, as well as the red “blood banner” symbolizing high justice as the essence of all the rights and privileges of lordship. Still on his knees, the vassal swore the oath of fealty during which he laid his finger upon the open book of the Gospels in the Emperor’s lap (documented from 1530 onwards). Finally, the Emperor invested him with the banners, one by one, thus symbolically granting him rule over the individual territories.

Another characteristic part of the ritual (documented from 1473 onwards) was that the surrounding spectators sought to seize the
banners for themselves – an act of spoiling, as was also common at other rituals of power: the crowd took possession of the ritually charged objects by force and tore them to pieces. And finally, the Emperor offered the vassal the Imperial sword whose pommel he was required to kiss. Still kneeling, he gave a speech of thanks before he was allowed to stand up and retire to his lodgings with his retinue.

It was less the power of the Emperor and more the power of the Empire itself that the ritual’s form made visible. Whoever received his fief in this way presented himself before the public as a member of the Empire. This ritual rendered the Imperial majesty and its hierarchically ordered and consensus-based system perceptible and in a certain sense truly real. Contemporaries had already given a name to these performative acts, which theologians call real presence, namely, the repraesentatio identitatis. According to this late medieval concept, the Emperor within the circle of the prince-electors “represented” the Empire in two senses of the word (see Fig. 3): by bringing the majesty of the Empire into view to be experienced through the senses in solemn rituals, but also by producing it in a technical, legal sense; that is to say, what was performed by those present in specific forms was bindingly valid as having been performed by the entire Empire as a political body. The fact that the vassal subordinated himself on his knees to the Imperial majesty and received the presentation of his status as a member of the Empire from this body reinforced the entire structure of the Empire pars pro toto.

The symbolic surplus of the ritual was thus a reciprocal one. Both sides profited from the splendor of the staging that made the centuries-old sacral authority of the Holy Roman Empire visible. By recognizing the majesty of Emperor and Empire as the source of his own power, the vassal himself participated in its traditional sacral legitimacy. In addition, the act gave vassals the opportunity to mobilize their social capital in the form of their intercessors, and to display their military power in the form of their mounted retinue. In other words, the investiture ritual revealed the reciprocal character of power in that the great vassals attributed

Figure 3. King Maximilian among the Prince-Electors. Woodcut from a diary of the Diet of Worms 1495.
to the Emperor, or respectively the Empire as a whole, a power from which they derived their own power as members of this whole.

The enfeoffments did not always take place in this very solemn manner; there were also less elaborate ways to perform them. But whenever more ritual grounding was needed, the solemn form was used. This was the case when the ritual enacted both a change of persons and a change in the Empire’s status system, for example, transforming a county into a duchy or creating a new electorate. (This happened very rarely, as when the Duke of Bavaria became an elector in 1624; see Fig. 4.) Such transformations, in fact, could only be carried out by ritual. It was thus of great importance that as many princes as possible take part in the solemn ceremony to acknowledge their consent to its effects by means of personal participation.

How did these rituals change during the early modern period? The tournament-like public form of investiture with banners declined over the course of the sixteenth century. The event shifted ever more frequently from the Imperial cities to the Emperor’s court, which consequently became the center of the Empire as a feudal system. This coincided with a general development in which the Emperor increasingly withdrew from the Empire into his patrimonial residence and no longer appeared in person at the Imperial diets except for his own coronation. In return, the electors and princes no longer appeared in person but sent envoys to receive their fiefs. Over the course of the seventeenth century, the entire procedure came to be legally codified and standardized in writing. Since the Middle Ages, the princes’ claim to their fiefs had de facto become hereditary, and the Emperor had no power to refuse the renewal of the investiture without cause. It is astonishing that despite this, everyone still considered the ritual to be necessary; it was never fully replaced by a written act. The letter of enfeoffment alone was never sufficient. Throughout the entire early modern period, it remained a matter of principle to repeat the investiture within a year and a day each time a feudal lord or vassal...
died, and thus to renew the relationship as one of personal loyalty. With each change of rule, the vassal had to request an investiture and submit to the ritual, by envoy if not personally. No one ever seriously questioned this.  

It was not until the eighteenth century that the ritual encountered a serious crisis from which it did not recover. There were several reasons for this, and the crisis mirrored that of the Imperial constitution in general. I can only touch upon this briefly here.

The great Imperial princes – some of them kings of countries outside the Empire – found it difficult to reconcile kneeling before the Emperor during the enfeoffment with their sovereign status under international law. The ritual repeatedly reinforced to the world that they were still subject to the Empire for a part of their lands. After Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, refused to take his fief from the Emperor in 1740, a dynamic of refusal broke out among the other electors and princes that could not be stopped. The investiture ritual almost completely died out despite decades of intensive diplomatic efforts on the part of the Imperial court. When Emperor Joseph II simply dropped all attempts to demand the performance of the investitures in 1788, a contemporary writer remarked that “the bond essentially securing the Imperial constitution and connecting the head and members” was finally dissolved.

I have described this history in detail because it is highly significant for the function of rituals in premodern times in general. The validity of the oldest, most elementary, and universal rules for political order was primarily, and at times exclusively, based on rituals. There was no positive legal, abstract, written basis of the Imperial order as a whole or of its most fundamental categories. There was no authoritative and legally binding, written definition of what constituted princely, royal or imperial majesty – only what the Emperor could not do was always more precisely fixed. There was no exact legal definition of the Empire. As jurists attempted to comprehend this in abstract and theoretical terms, they found themselves in a dilemma: a consensus about it could not be obtained in a discursive way. Only rituals allowed everyone to experience the unity and order of the Empire. The ambivalent and vague nature of rituals, the fact that they were always open to various interpretations, made it possible to represent a consensus that could never have been brought about by discourse.

On the other hand, in the late Empire there was no adequate, legitimate way to amend ritual forms and adapt them to new conditions.


9 Teutsche Staatskonslei, ed. Johann August Reuss (Ulm, 1788-89), 22.321; see also Johann Jakob Moser, Von der Teutschen Leihens-Verfassung [...](Frankfurt/Main, Leipzig, 1774), 307.
The political dynamic, however, could not be immobilized by rigidified old forms. This situation produced an impasse from which there was no way out and created parallel worlds of a sort. As long as the old rituals were still performed, they continued to demonstrate a consensus about the fundamental political order, even though many powerful members no longer identified with them and regarded them as ridiculous anachronistic relics. Yet the old rituals still continued to function as usual. In a certain way, one can say that rituals bring about what they represent, whether or not they reflect the inner convictions of all participants. This is why we often call them “empty rituals” nowadays. Nonetheless, they sustain the political order as an institutional fiction. This is precisely their function.

IV. Political Rituals Then and Now

Let us return to the politics of the present day. What is the situation in the modern age? Is there a universal grammar of rituals? And what has changed structurally? Have political rituals lost their binding power?

At first glance, the similarities are apparent on the level of outward forms (see Figures 5-10). There seems to be a symbolic vocabulary with a whole series of more or less universally comprehensible basic elements, even if they do arise in countless variations. These include specific ritual gestures. Think only of the touching of sacred objects, kissing or hugging as gestures of friendship, brotherhood, and reconciliation. Or think of the act of kneeling as a gesture of voluntary self-abasement, penitence, or subservience.

The arrangement of persons in space is also quite universally effective (see Fig. 5-6). It is not by chance that interpersonal social relationships are generally expressed in metaphors of space, of spatial relations:

Figure 5. The inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009, at the United States Capitol in Washington DC. Source: Corbis / Scott Andreas. Reprinted by permission.

10 See David Luebke’s comment in this issue.
above/below, in front/behind, proximity/distance, center/periphery. One need only think of terms such as “your Highness,” or words like “subordinate,” “upper class/lower class,” and so on. This can be explained by recalling that power is essentially experienced in face-to-face situations. The fact that spatial arrangements symbolize power and elicit respect can be easily illustrated through the example of a procession or parade (see Fig.7-8). A great many horses and wagons or cars and people, orderly intervals, disciplined, measured movements: all these characteristics connect a present-day police motorcade with a baroque procession of princes in the seventeenth century. Time also plays a central role in the ritual staging of power: the time that the procession takes, for instance, or the time that one must wait in order to personally see the powerful figure or to speak with him. It would be possible to invoke many further examples of continuities in the ritual grammar of the premodern and the modern. Even today, a public ritual generally begins with a procession to the place of the event and ends with a shared meal or celebration.

Yet despite these continuities, doesn’t it seem that today’s rituals are somewhat pale in comparison to those of the premodern era? Why should this be? Germans would surely answer these questions differently from Americans, for the two political cultures vary conspicuously in their political rituals. And yet, haven’t rituals everywhere tended to forfeit their binding force in the modern era?

At first glance, it is clear that the Atlantic revolutions precipitated a break not only in the entire sociopolitical order, but also in ritual culture. The ideal of democratic transparency and the equality of citizens replaced late baroque absolutism, the ceremonial of lordship, and the hierarchy of the estates. Modern political culture is founded on the idea that political power and social order should not rest on images, symbols, and rituals that emotionally overpower people, but solely on words, good reasons, and rational procedures. This was the message of the Enlightenment and the democratic revolutions. These still
remain our ideals. Today it is disparaging to say that a political act is “purely symbolic” or an “empty ritual” in contrast to “real” political action.

The modern critique of ritualism is by no means new. Since the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, strong anti-ritualistic movements have arisen repeatedly: from the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Classical Modernism following the First World War, to the protests of 1968. The goal of all these movements was not only to disempower the old rituals and, along with them, the old order itself – the Roman Catholic Church, the Ancien Régime, the political establishments. More fundamentally, they always claimed to be categorically setting living spirit, true inner sincerity and authenticity against rigid, dead, empty, and false forms. Yet none of these movements could avoid the creation of new rituals, “rituals of anti-ritualism.” And, taken as a whole, their effect was anything but a reduction in the number of rituals; quite the contrary, they led to a pluralization of rituals. Take the French Revolution, which was itself a gigantic spectacle full of perfect acts of staging. To a particularly excessive degree, the revolutionaries relied upon festivals, rituals, and suggestive mass events. They could not avoid drawing upon the ritual tradition, even though they were staging equality instead of hierarchy. To this end, they combined all imaginable old and new, sacred and secular set-pieces from the repertory of ancient, Christian, monarchical, and republican symbols. There is no doubt that this patchwork way of dealing with rituals had a promising future.

So have we changed anything fundamental in how we deal with political rituals? I will content myself here with a few concluding theses.

Take these two very different representations of installation into office: Figure 9 shows the United States in 2009, while Figure 10 shows the “Oath of the Councilmen of the City of Iglau”...
from around 1400. The core of the two ritual events— the three fingers of the right hand raised in oath, the oath as ritual self-commitment—remains the same, as does their effectiveness, apparently, their “social magic”: upon their conclusion, the senator has become president and the citizens have become councilmen.

Yet there are also striking differences. First, in contrast to premodern rituals, modern ones exhibit a certain material austerity (even though German ones are considerably plainer than those in the United States). There are good reasons for this. Political rituals of the Medieval and Early Modern periods always also served as a demonstration of the material and cultural wealth of all participants, indeed, of the entire society’s hierarchy of social rank. Today, the latter demonstration takes place on a completely different stage. The constitutional and legal system and the system of social inequality are largely separate; or at least they are supposed to be. For this reason, a president today no longer needs to glitter like a king in gold and gemstones but can restrict himself to a black suit.

Second: In Figure 10, the overarching crucifix dominates the group of those taking the oath. This would be a problem in a modern liberal and pluralistic democracy since Western societies at least aspire to keep the political and religious orders constitutionally separated. This does not mean, however, that political rituals cannot be elevated and sacralized, in turn, into a kind of civil religion. As a rule, however, installations into office no longer take place within the framework of a church service, and the oath of office is valid even if not sworn upon the Holy Scripture. For us, signs and symbols are no longer the elements of a universe of divine symbols but are chosen arbitrarily, created by persons, and available at will. The old stock of symbols is dealt with very freely: all of them, even symbols that were once most sacred, can be the objects of parody, mockery, caricature, and,

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14 Long before Obama’s inauguration, internet bloggers speculated about whether he would say “So help me God.” Article II, Section 1, of the United States Constitution does not provide this phrase, nor does it stipulate the use of a Bible.
more than anything, commercial exploitation. The use of symbols has become pluralized and arbitrary; with a few exceptions, anyone can usurp any symbol and use it to his own ends.

Third, and most crucially: Our political order, like that of any modern organization, is available as a text, as a written founding document. We have a “constitution” in the strict sense, to which we assign clear precedence over all other law. The constitution preserves the founding norms of the state in general, abstract, and systematic form. Their validity is based upon their being fixed in writing, which they owe either to a one-time act of foundation or to a legally designated process, but not to regularly renewed oath-taking by each individual citizen. Since it is possible to consult the constitutional order anytime, it is no longer necessary to symbolically and ritually stage it as it was in the premodern period, when the validity of the entire order could be upheld in no other way than through a complex nexus of rituals.

This is related to a fourth point: The way we take part in rituals today has certainly changed. It makes a crucial difference whether the vast majority of citizens follow the ritual on a screen as an anonymous mass public – if at all – or whether all those with the right to political participation are personally present. The efficacy of rituals is essentially based on the personal presence of all participants, who through their participation in the ritual reciprocally commit themselves to what they perform there. This does not mean that the depiction of rituals – in words and images – might not have stimulated their elaboration.15 Yet the more complex society became and the more governmental rule was intensified, the less rituals could continue to be organized face-to-face by means of personal commitments, and the more they were converted into impersonal, abstract binding procedures based

15 See David Luebke’s comment in this issue.
on writing. The modern state is no longer a community that can be integrated through face-to-face interaction. In the course of the modern state-building process, the public, personal presence of the ruler became less sufficient for the exercise of rule, but also less and less necessary. The citizens of a modern state are bound by its constitutional norms even if they have never sworn an oath to that effect. Thus, it no longer matters whether they are present during the swearing-in of a new head of state, merely watch it on television, or ignore it altogether.

Communication by the media and the general pluralization of society are two factors that foster a more distanced relationship to political rituals. Rituals are subject to unrestrained commercialization, museification, folklorization, spontaneous quotation, strategic reinvention, parody, and ironic refraction. In brief, the modern way of dealing with political rituals seems to me fundamentally broken. But perhaps this is a very German point of view. In Germany, most people have a distanced, if not ironic, relationship to large and solemn political rituals – for which there are obvious historical reasons. As mentioned above, we moderns do not wish to be overwhelmed emotionally, but persuaded by good reasons. But I wonder whether we are deceiving ourselves and underestimating the significance and efficacy of rituals. Who among us can claim to be immune to the emotional effects of such rituals, even when viewing them on television? And even someone who does not believe in the efficacy of rituals must assume that others do. For this reason, it was surely wise to have Barack Obama repeat the oath of office.

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