Ritual, Taboo and Political Protest
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The aim of this article is to examine a specific response of the group Unite Against Racism (UAR) to electoral victories by the British National Party (BNP) in terms of ritual dynamics. We will first discuss the nature of taboo drawing on the work of Douglas. This will be related to Turner’s work on liminality and ritual and Edmund Leach’s on taboo. The relationship between ritual and taboo will then be examined as will the BNP’s policies in comparison to the beliefs of the UAR. Thereafter we will discuss the nature of the UAR’s response to BNP victories and how this can be understood as being a ritual in the senses suggested by both Leach and Gilbert Lewis. The degree to which the BNP, or votes for the BNP in certain areas, might be seen to create taboo for UAR members will be discussed in depth. It will be demonstrated that the superficially senseless act of the UAR protesting against democracy makes sense when analysed as ritual.

**Key Words:** Ritual; Taboo; Liminality; British National Party (BNP); Mary Douglas; Unite Against Racism (UAR).

**Introduction**

Superficially, it appears contradictory for a group that claims to wish to protect democracy from its opponents to engage in an act of violent protest when their opponents achieve democratic representation. An example can be noted when the British National Party (BNP) became the second largest group on Burnley Council (in northern England) in May 2003 and its councillors attended the chamber to be sworn in. They were met by members of Unite Against Racism (UAR) who verbally abused them and threw a number of eggs at them (Allison: 16th May 2003.) It might be argued that by doing so, Unite Against Racism is protesting not against the British National Party but against those who have voted for them and consequently against the very democracy which they claim to seek to defend. But while UAR’s protest against a democratic election result appears peculiar to the observer, I would submit that it makes considerably greater sense if understood through the parameters of ritual. This article will assess such action through

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ritual and thus contribute to a greater understanding of groups such as UAR, which have not previously been examined anthropologically.¹

It will be my submission that the manner in which groups such as UAR protest against democratic election results is, in effect, a kind of ritual which allows them to deal with the way in which their category system has been challenged. In arguing this, I will first examine the concept of taboo. I will draw upon Mary Douglas’ analysis (Douglas: 1966) and also that of Edmund Leach (Leach: 1964) in order to argue that the ‘taboo’ is that which is difficult to categorise within a structured system and is consequently something which brings the boundaries of that system into question. I will further argue, drawing upon Turner (1969) that the taboo should be understood as something that is essentially ‘liminal.’ I will, thereafter, look at the ways in which ritual is employed to deal with that which is taboo or liminal. Thence I will examine the ways in which so called ‘far right’ political groups might be understood, in themselves, to be ‘taboo’ to groups such as UAR, and hence why their success in an election, when it occurs, might legitimately be understood as liminal. In so doing I hope to more clearly understand the dynamics of a “democratic” group protesting in the aftermath of an apparently clean election result.

Defining ‘Taboo’

Before discussing the concept of taboo, I would like to look at Douglas Davies’ idea that a funeral is ‘Words Against Death.’ (Davies: 1997, 1). Davies’ argument is that the death of one of its members poses a challenge to societal order. Funerary ritual is consequently ‘Words Against Death’ because communities reassert their existence through ritual. ‘Death’ would appear to be ‘taboo’ precisely because it engenders disorder, an argument originally expounded by Mary Douglas.

Douglas argues that a system of categories through which the world can be comprehended can be understood through recourse to the notion of the “clean and the unclean.” (Douglas: 1966, 9.) She concludes that the term ‘taboo’ refers to that which does not fit into a system of accepted categories: that which is anomalous, between one category and another, is

¹ For a social anthropological analysis of the European ‘far right’ see for example Gingrich (2006).
taboo. For this reason the areas of entrance to our bodies and their various products are unclean. The mouth, anus and genitals are located at the margins between the body and the world (121.) These areas and their products bring into question precisely where the body ends and the external world begins.

Leach argues a similar point, but specifically in relation to taboo language and the conceptual basis that underpins it. For Leach, taboo language is that which relates to an idea that linguistically blurs and challenges boundaries (Leach: 1964, 23.) Thus, Leach argues that blasphemous swearing is taboo. Jesus and the Virgin Mary are highly ambiguous because they occupy the space somewhere between God and Man. Equally, gods themselves can be understood as ambiguous because they are concomitantly set apart from man and a part of the nature of his world (39). The same point could be made about both Heaven and Hell since man’s destiny was traditionally considered to lead to either one or the other and hence they are both a part of this life and of the next life. The taboo is suggested to be that which challenges order in a system of categories and we might consequently submit that the taboo is that which is ‘liminal.’

Liminality

Turner looks at liminality in terms of Rites of Passage such as marriage or betrothal. He argues that during a Rite of Passage, a person is in a state of transition. They are moving from one clearly defined phase of life to another clearly defined one. Thus, the liminal phase is that which is between one point and another. It is not clearly defined and it is ambiguous in terms of identity (Turner: 1969, 94.) Structured ‘rites’ are used to symbolically end liminality, as in the marriage rite after a period of ambiguity while engaged.(95.) Hence I would submit that we are justified in terming that which is taboo as in some sense ‘liminal.’ The taboo is liminal because it is between two clear structured categories but does not fit into either. Turner himself argues that a liminal period can be very psychological difficult, just like that which is taboo (Turner: 1982, 46). Indeed, the taboo can be made ‘clean,’ as will now be discussed.\

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2 For a detailed examination of swearing see, for example, Hughes (1991).
3 For a more detailed discussion of Turner’s view of liminality see, for example, Davies (2002) or Dutton (2006).
Ritual and the Taboo

It is noted by Douglas that ritual is frequently invoked as an antidote to the presence or influence of the taboo. In response to taboo, Douglas submits, ‘ritual reconciles disorder.’ (Douglas, 95.) To demonstrate this point, Douglas draws upon her previous study of tribal groups. She submits that puberty is essentially a time of dirt. It is a liminal phase and consequently a time of disorder. Thus, some kind of ritual is required in order to confront it (97.) Such thinking would appear to be congruous with Turner’s study of tribal groups. Turner notes that ‘Rites of Passage’ are mainly employed during stages of existential transition (Turner, 94.) Assessing Turner’s analysis in the context of Douglas’ model we might submit that phases of transition, by virtue of the way in which they blur structural borders, are liminal and consequently unclean. Hence ‘Rites of Passage,’ which often involve some kind of ritualistic dimension, are perceived to be employed in similar contexts to those noted by Douglas. She also observes the ceremony of the newly wed bridegroom carrying his bride over the threshold when they enter their new abode upon return from their honeymoon. This, she submits, is symbolic of the movement from one phase into another (114.) but it is a ritual in the sense that it allows the liminality of that phase between marriage and starting ones new life together to be dealt with properly.

An obvious example of a liminal phase is death. Death challenges structure because it essentially brings the borders of life and the boundaries between this world and the possible next world into question. Hence the death of an individual commences a liminal phase which is confronted by means of funerary ritual. This ritual has the effect of ending the liminal phase and moreover reassuring the society whose certainty is questioned by the event of death. In this regard, Davies notes that death itself signifies the point at which one begins to change from ones old nature to ones new nature (Davies: 2002, 102.) Thus, this phase is likely to be impure while the following phase is likely ‘to be marked by ritual purity.’ (102.) We note once more the way in which the liminal tends to be made pure or clean, as it were, by means of the ritual process. Inherent in such ritual would appear to be a cleansing dynamic.

As such it would appear that that which challenges a system of order in some way – especially by means of it being liminal in
some form – is consequently taboo. Perhaps there is something inherent in human nature which requires that such a lack of structure is rectified. In this regard, Hans Mol cites a desire for order as being basic amongst humanity (Mol: 1976, 1) and Stephen Reiss submits that it is one of humanity’s sixteen most basic desires (Reiss: 2000.) But certainly such taboo appears not infrequently to be dealt with by means of ritual. Drawing upon this methodology, we will examine the way in which the election of BNP councillors would appear to require the performance of ritual by people such as members of the UAR.

**Anthropological Analysis and Potential Criticisms**

This article will focus on a very specific example of the reaction of UAR to the BNP. It may be asked why the article should be so narrow. There are many groups similar in belief and activity to UAR. I have chosen to concentrate on this very specific example because the aim of the article is to understand an example of political activity from an anthropological perspective. In order to successfully achieve this, I would submit that the article should focus on a specific ritual in a specific group. However, it should be a representative ritual, which is repeated on many occasions, such that broad anthropological conclusions can be drawn.

Of course, it might be countered that the reaction of the UAR members to the election of BNP councillors has nothing necessarily to do with ritual, liminality and taboo. It might be claimed that ANL members dislike the BNP and what they stand for and act as they do out of pure frustration. I would suggest that this is a somewhat superficial analysis. We are still left asking why it is frustrating for members of UAR. This question can be understood using a variety of different methods and I do not believe that these are mutually exclusive. It can be understood in quotidian terms, as the above mentioned argument understands it. But it could also be understood using psychological or anthropological methods. ‘Frustration’ is another explanation but it is not within the same methodology. Of course, the UAR are frustrated and angry. The article, however, will offer an explanation for this frustration, drawing upon the anthropological method.

**The BNP and UAR**

Let us, then, return to the analysis. The most germane
question we must examine here is precisely why UAR
demonstrations in response to BNP electoral successes should
take a form that might be accurately described as ritualistic. Why
is the so-called ‘far right,’ or at least the election of their
representatives, sufficiently taboo to merit such a response by an
organisation that claims to respect the idea of democracy. I
would submit that, in line with Douglas’ argument, such an
election precipitates a liminal situation, so far as the UAR is
concerned, which only the potency of ritual can remedy. I am
not suggesting that the BNP is itself taboo, or at least I am not
attempting to examine this issue. I am suggesting that the
election of their councillors, or indeed the party gaining some
other moderate electoral success, is taboo for its opponents, and
creates for them a sense of liminality.

The BNP was established in 1982 by John Tyndall. In
1992 it won, and lost in 1993, a council seat in Millwall (East
London). In 2001 it came third in Oldham West at the General
Election. In 2002, under Nick Griffin, it first won council seats in
Burnley. In 2006, it has over fifty council seats, mainly in
industrial towns such as Burnley, and is also the second largest
party on Barking Council in East London. The BNP are
generally seen as a pro-white and anti-immigrant party. United
Against Racism was formerly known as the Anti-Nazi League. It
was established in 1977 by a combination of Trade Unionists
and Labour party supporters in opposition to the UK’s anti-
immigration National Front. The group was wound up in 1981,
as the National Front had all but collapsed, but re-launched
again in 1992 after the small electoral success for the BNP
already mentioned. In 2003, it merged with a number of other
groups and is now commonly known as Unite Against Racism or,
sometimes, Unite Against Fascism. Its leader is Weyman
Bennett, a member of the Socialist Worker’s Party.4

BNP Policies and the UAR Perspective

The BNP would appear to represent the antithesis of the
ideals held by the proponents of multicultural society, and those
who support the interests of ethnic minorities and homosexuals.
It might further be argued that the BNP, or at least many of its
members, equally stand opposed to policies relating to reverse

4 For a detailed history of anti-racism in Britain see, for example, Bonnett
(2000).
discrimination against the interests of the native white population of Britain, as also to the “anti-racist” legislation passed in Britain during recent decades. By contrast, UAR is widely understood to be a group on the radical left with strong links to essentially Marxist groups such as the Socialist Worker Party (Lewis: 1988, 137, Bonnett: 2000, 110.) Moreover, the way in which the leader of the BNP – Nick Griffin – and its former leader have both expressed sympathy for the nationalist values of Hitler’s Germany and questioned accounts of the Holocaust might be perceived as a further example of their antithetical nature. But to further demonstrate this point, it might be worth examining the policies of the BNP in somewhat more depth and, moreover, the extent to which they would appear to contrast with those of groups such as UAR.

In many ways, I would submit that this contrast is so profound that it is perhaps more useful to examine it on the level of a general political direction rather than with regard to specific policies. Hence when groups such as UAR favour a multicultural society, the BNP argue strongly in favour of a mono-cultural society constructed around their interpretation of traditional British culture. In this regard, the BNP’s understanding of British ethnicity involves a strong racial dimension. As such, they adopt a policy whereby all “non-whites” will be “encouraged to return to their nations of ethnic origin” by means of “generous resettlement grants.” (BNP: 2001) This is a modification of their previous policy of forcibly repatriating all non-whites who have settled in Britain since the 1948 Immigration Act, but on a broad level, the BNP appears to continue to place considerable importance on race and racial differences. Rather than advocating the coming together and uniting of diverse racial groups, they advocate racial segregation in Britain in the interests of racial preservation. They also advocate complete withdrawal from the European Union and the cessation of overseas aid to less developed countries. Equally, all immigrants from non-white countries, including asylum seekers, would be turned away from Britain at the point of entry (BNP Manifesto: 2005). Ethnic minorities would not be obliged to leave Britain under a BNP government but were any

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5 Precisely how one defines ‘non-white’ is naturally a matter of some discussion as is the means by which one might define those of ‘mixed race.’ But this nuance is, I think, a matter for the BNP and their opponents and not for this article.
to stay the BNP advocate the revoking of all race-relations legislation with regard to incitement to racial hatred and discrimination on racial grounds. Moreover, at a local level, the BNP advocate a policy of mono-culturalism in favour of the ‘white majority.’ (BNP Local Manifesto: 2003.) They favour those who are traditionally regarded, in some sense, as empowered rather than those they regard as alien invaders of their homeland. Thus, a BNP Council would cease to provide any money for ethnic community projects of any kind. In terms of schooling policy it would appear that notions of multiculturalism would also be actively confronted. Regardless of a pupil’s religiosity, school dinners are to contain one meal and one meal only and this is to be the meal that all students are to eat (BNP Local Manifesto: 2003).

Indeed, the BNP’s policy with regard to minorities might also be understood to be deeply conservative in outlook. In this regard, their national manifesto advocates the recriminalisation of abortion except in restricted circumstances such as rape and when the process of giving birth would result in the mother’s death. Homosexuality is not actually to be re-criminalised (though this was formerly the BNP’s policy), but the party advocates the banning of any public promotion of it. But moving aside from what are merely the party’s policies advocated in manifestos, it might be also useful to examine the connections of the BNP. Perhaps the most controversial is in relation to ‘Holocaust denial.’ Whether or not ordinary BNP members, including their councillors, happen to deny the Holocaust is not something which could be discerned without extensive research but one can certainly state that BNP leader, Nick Griffin, for example, has questioned the numbers killed in the Holocaust (BBC, 2001) Even by asking for any kind of historical debate on this, he is a ‘Holocaust denier’ for members of UAR and, indeed, the BBC.\(^6\)

**The British National Party and Taboo**

So having established the political stance of the BNP and the manner in which they contrast with the agenda of those advocating a multicultural society, we must ask why the election

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\(^6\) For a relatively up-to-date history of the BNP see, for example, Renton (2003). Also, for a discussion of Holocaust Denial, which is representative in following such a broad definition of the term, see Lipstadt (1993).
of BNP Councillors might be considered to be, in some sense, liminal and taboo. Of course the extent to which such an event is liminal presupposes the possession of certain categories of thought that would likely be held by their opponents, such as the belief in virtues of a multicultural society.\(^7\)

Firstly we might suggest, more broadly, that the clear presence of the BNP as a functioning political organisation with thousands of members challenges the structural ideology of UAR and for them creates liminality for them. As long as a party such as the BNP exists and is able to express its dissenting views we cannot submit that the notion of Britain as a multicultural society is a fixed category. The nature of British society may change precisely because there is conspicuously an organised group within Britain who wish it to change. Hence the boundaries of such a notion – which those of an international, socialist orientation might wish to be certain and unquestioned – remain questionable. The BNP compel us to question the utility, success and existence of a multicultural society by the manner in which they question it. The same might be said to be true of the nature of ‘racism,’ or even the reality and dimensions of the Holocaust.\(^8\) Hence, their existence causes difficulties with category boundaries and we might submit that their clear presence – emphasised by their election to office – is surely perceived as taboo by their opponents.\(^9\)

**Challenging Multiculturalism**

For the BNP to gain a large number of votes and particularly for them to accrue sufficient votes to elect councillors would appear to indicate that British society, or least a significant segment of the British population, does not see Britain as a multicultural society. Or it might indicate, perhaps more interestingly, that Britain is now a multicultural society, because if it were not then it is unlikely that a party such as the BNP, which appears to hold race as a central component of its manifesto, would gain many votes. Kivisto, for example,\

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\(^7\) For an examination of multiculturalism as an ideology see, for example, Ellis (2005). Also, for discussions of the nature of ethnicity see, for example, Eriksen (2002) or Kidd (1999).

\(^8\) This is obviously more relevant with regard to a discussion of specific BNP members.

\(^9\) In using the term ‘they’ I do not wish to give the impression that the BNP are an utterly united force. This is probably not true of any political party. I am assuming certain shared views by virtue of an individual’s membership of this party.
demonstrates the extent of Black and Asian immigration into Britain since the decline of the British Empire (Kivisto: 2002, 116) and argues for a direct connection between such immigration and the rise of the National Front and, more recently, the BNP (Kivisto, 144.) However, it would appear that Britain, far from actually being a multicultural society, is, in this sense, liminal. It is true that Britain has moved towards being a multicultural society both in terms of its racial composition and also in terms of other issues such as representation, but a large vote for the BNP, sufficient to achieve a number of elected councillors, would appear, at least to a degree, to indicate a desire amongst a substantial number of people to reject multiculturalism. And this would appear to leave Britain, in this regard, somewhat liminal.

We might ask why significant numbers of white residents in towns such as Burnley and Barking and, much earlier, Millwall should wish to vote for a party promoting the interests of the native white population. Indeed, McMaster points out the extent to which they are portrayed as being ‘Nazis’ by UAR by virtue of their sense of racial identity (McMaster: 2001, 192.) A large vote for a party such as the BNP would appear consequently to indicate that a large portion of people do not self-identify as being part of ‘Multicultural Britain.’ Rather they regard themselves as part of the more exclusive Britain and share a sense of Britishness as advocated by the BNP. Once more it would appear that Britain in certain respects is not a truly multicultural society but is liminal in this regard. Indeed, a large vote for the BNP would appear to be a step away from a multicultural society rather than towards it.

**Challenging the ‘Nazi’ Taboo**

For UAR, the members of the BNP are understood to be and are portrayed as Nazis, as also are their sympathisers and those close to them (Solomos: 2003, 203.) For members of UAR there is nothing positive to be said with regard to the Nazis. The Nazis and Hitler are perceived as being, essentially, evil. And

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10 Of course, we cannot be certain of electors’ reasons for voting for the BNP but the vote could certainly be interpreted in this way.

11 I do not use this word as a literary device or with any hint of hyperbole. I genuinely believe that this word best paraphrases the feelings of groups such as UAR towards Adolf Hitler and the far right in general. The word was actually used about the BNP by Roy Hattersley, the former Labour Party deputy leader, on an
moreover, the same is felt with regard to the BNP and their policies. Consequently, the fact that a significant number of ordinary and often, but not exclusively, working-class voters would choose to align themselves with the BNP would appear to throw a degree of doubt on such a construct. UAR is either compelled to admit that a large number of people – all those who voted for the BNP in sufficient numbers such that councillors are elected – are Nazis, or they must concede that the policies of the BNP are not as ‘reprehensible’ as they had originally stated. Hence in this respect a large BNP vote likewise precipitates something anomalous and difficult to define for a member of a group such as UAR. This fact, I would submit, would appear to defy the UAR category system and further demonstrate the level of taboo, at least for the UAR, involved in voting for such a political party.

**Challenging the Way Workers Should Vote**

But we might equally submit that such election results challenge the self-perception and in this sense the category system of socialist groups more broadly. We have previously noted the UAR to be an essentially socialist group and the term ‘Marxist’ has even been employed by one writer in this area (Lewis, 137.) Hence we might expect a supposedly Marxist group, or at least a group with socialist inclinations, to expect members of what we might call the working-class to vote for socialist political parties or at the very least to vote for social democratic parties, as we might wish to term the Labour Party. Certainly socialist organisations traditionally identify, at least in theory, with the working-class. To a degree, the “empowerment of the working-class,” or of those lowest in socio-economic status, has been an important aspect to the dynamics of socialist politics as far back as Karl Marx. It is true that a number of contemporary socialist groups also emphasise the empowerment of others perceived to be disempowered, such as ethnic minorities. An example is the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) which advocates, in this regard, that major ethnic minority
languages spoken in Scotland, such as Urdu, should be recognised as national languages of Scotland (Scottish Socialist Party Manifesto: 2003).\textsuperscript{13}

But the SSP also emphasise the empowerment of all those who are perceived to be socio-economically disadvantaged, not merely ethnic minorities, and the same is true of other contemporary socialist groups. Hence, we might submit that there is a perception that the socio-economically disadvantaged should vote for socialist political parties, holding not dissimilar views to many in UAR, precisely because it is those parties that apparently advocate their interests. For albeit a relatively small number of people in certain disadvantaged communities – but sufficient numbers to gain representation for the BNP – to vote for a political party which is perceived by UAR as being ‘Neo-Nazi’ and hence the antithesis of themselves, might appear to challenge such a structured perception. Such a result from the kind of relatively deprived wards in areas such as Burnley and Barking which have elected BNP Councillors would appear to challenge, in my judgement, the perception of socialists, such as the UAR, that it is their understanding which is in the interests of the working-class. It would appear to demonstrate, at least to a certain extent, that there is another group, which appears to embody a great deal of that which they oppose, which concomitantly seems to represent the interests of the working-class in the perception of a majority thereof in certain areas. Thus McMaster argues that the BNP themselves claim to represent the interest of ‘the ordinary people.’ (McMaster, 199.) Indeed, the BNP’s councillors themselves are generally found to be what one might call members of the working-class. Their composition on Burnley Council, for example, includes a builder and a former toilet-cleaner, and other councils where the BNP have representation this pattern is often, but not exclusively, repeated.\textsuperscript{14} This would further appear to indicate a certain degree of liminality, something somewhat difficult to easily categorise. Logically the working-class should vote for parties that are socialist – and it might be submitted that many do – but certain members of the social group are voting for a

\textsuperscript{13} For a detailed discussion of the Scottish Socialist Party’s history and place in Scottish nationalism see Dutton (2002).

\textsuperscript{14} Their councillor in Broxbourne, for example, is a retired taxi-driver.
party at the opposite end of the political spectrum. As such it is taboo at least for the BNP’s opponents.

**UAR and Ritual Dynamics**

We have noted the way in which the election of BNP councillors would appear to possess all the dynamics of the ‘taboo’ particularly for members of a group such as UAR. Such elections would appear to be something seemingly anomalous in many ways that challenge a system of operational categories and, moreover, creates a certain degree of liminality and uncertainty. We have also previously noted the propensity for such liminality in groups to be confronted by means of ritual (Douglas, 94) and, indeed, it might be germane to examine the activities of UAR in this regard. Hence we might ask how such activity can be paralleled with the dynamics of ritual. It might be suggested that UAR’s activity here is merely political campaigning. They wish to draw attention to the BNP in order to discourage further electoral success. But the way in which the BNP would appear to be a taboo for them would render a ritualistic response quite congruous with previous research and we will thus demonstrate the ritual aspects of this response.

In conducting this argument I will draw upon the example cited at the beginning of the article but the fact that many similar examples might be cited is perhaps demonstrative of the activity’s ritualistic aspects. There has been much debate over whether ritual should be understood as language, as has been argued by Leach (Leach, 1976, 9) or whether certain rituals can merely be understood as ends in themselves (Gilbert Lewis: 1980, 35.) Though this is of interest this is not a debate in which I intend to engage. I would argue that aspects of UAR’s ritual could be congruous with either interpretation as will be demonstrated. Let us then examine UAR’s protest at Burnley.

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15 Of course the extent to which the ‘far left’ and the ‘far right’ might be perceived to merge at the extremes, in terms of totalitarianism for example, is a debate of which I remain mindful and thus a little hesitant in employing such language. Certainly, the specific policies would be expected to be somewhat divergent.

16 Another moot point, which I observe in a footnote for this very reason, is that a BNP election victory indicates to committed socialists that their views, in which they presumably firmly believe, do not actually assist the working-class but manifestly fail them. This would again appear to challenge the category system of such people if, central to it, is the utility of socialism. This point is argued by Rankin, (2002).
Information with regard to this was, it must be emphasised, secondary. It involved reading the published literature in the British Press with regard to the protest and observing the BBC broadcast with regard to the issue.\textsuperscript{17} UAR’s protest at Burnley ran in the following manner. Members of UAR assembled themselves at the entrance to the Town Hall in Burnley. They had with them placards that bore anti-BNP slogans such as: “Shut Down the BNP,” “Nazi Scum,” “Don’t Support the Nazis” and so forth. These placards were professionally made, displaying their own symbol. They also had eggs with which to pelt the BNP councillors as they arrived and there was equally a police presence. Upon the arrival of the councillors, in their cars, the UAR members began to become more vocal and then repeat over and over, “Nazi Scum! Nazi Scum!” and other verbal abuse. When the councillors left their cars a number of UAR members became even more active throwing eggs at the councillors and attempting to get close to them. This was prevented by a combination of the police and British National Party supporters. The councillors were quickly led into the building as minor skirmishes occurred. The UAR protest was then dispersed by the police.

Repetition and Ritual

How might we understand the ritual dynamics of such a protest? In the first instance it can be understood to be highly repetitive. The activity is firstly repetitive in the broadest sense inasmuch as members of UAR engage in a similar ritual whenever members of the BNP either are known to have won seats on local councils or attempt to enter the council chamber. In each case a similar ritual is followed. The group will assemble together with the same placards as those previously mentioned. The object of their protest – in the form of a BNP candidate or councillor – will materialise and the group will become more vocal and physical, normally pointing or waving their arms and shouting, “Nazi Scum!” In this sense we might suggest that the ritual of attending an event in which the BNP are involved – and whose support and perceptions might be seen to create liminality – would be likely to have a mutually assuring effect with regard to group dynamics. This is because each time

\textsuperscript{17} It is difficult to conduct first hand research here as the protests will tend to be sudden, often just after BNP victories as was the case here.
something which might be seen to challenge the group’s structural categories – such as a large British National Party vote – occurs, members of the UAR are able to engage in a ritual in which they have previously engaged involving language and symbols relating to their group and with which they are familiar. As a consequence, we might submit that such activity can indeed be compared to the kind of rituals engaged in at times of apparent uncertainty or change highlighted by Turner or Davies.

Concomitantly, we might submit, the UAR’s ritual is itself internally repetitive, a further point which is indicative of ritualistic activity. The central point of the ritual consequently involves UAR members moving their arms up and down into the air and shouting, “Nazi Scum!” continuously at members of the BNP. Newberg et al examine the dynamics of ritual in religious groups and they submit that ritual tends to involve a certain degree repetition which, indeed, marks it out as being ritualistic (Newberg et al. 2002, 81.) They submit in this regard that ritual will tend not only to be repetitive but also to possess a certain degree of rhythm. The UAR protest that we have noted would certainly appear to reflect such an emphasis on rhythm and repetition as a component of ritual adding further credence to the comparison itself. Moreover, the ritual involves the repetition of a specific phrase which, I would argue, assists in confronting the challenge to the UAR’s system of categories precipitated by BNP success. Shouting “Nazi scum” at members of the BNP might certainly be perceived to remedy such a situation at least to a degree. So doing appears to reassert the UAR claim that the BNP are “Nazis,” and, also, that “Nazis” are contemptible. the validity of UAR doctrine is challenged when people whom the UAR believes should vote socialist vote instead for the BNP, and repetitively asserting that the BNP are “Nazi Scum” would, in my judgement, be useful in remediying the intellectual difficulties caused.

**Ritual and Community Reassurance**

We might suggest that UAR also parallels such rituals because it involves those who are experiencing liminality coming together as one and focussing on a goal. By doing this,

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18 They further argue that ritual, consequently, softens the limits of the self and creates social bonds. This will be further explored below.
they strengthen that community’s social bonds. Certainly this would appear to reflect Turner who notes the connection between liminality (especially as it relates to status change) and the use of ritual. Turner argues that during ritual community members – in the liminal phase – feel a sense of bonded togetherness in which social structures are less prominent. He terms this communitas (Turner, 94). The dimension involving the community whose certainty has been challenged meeting corporately and focussing towards a shared goal has been noted by a number of commentators including Durkheim (Durkheim: 1965, 254.)

A particular example noted by various anthropologists has been sacrifice when members of a community undergoing liminality come together and perform a sacrifice which, at least within their system of categories, should remedy such an uncertainty. Indeed, it has been suggested that public execution can be compared to a sacrifice inasmuch as it might be seen to involve killing a criminal in order to reassert the categories of society that the criminal has himself challenged (e.g. Bourdillon: 1980, 14.). The act itself would be likely to bring the community together, as Durkheim argues, precisely because they are engaging in a physical activity together and experiencing strong emotions and the same could be true, to some extent, with UAR and their demonstrations against the BNP. The protest creates communitas bringing the UAR community together and reassuring it. The presence of a clear ‘other’ (the BNP) would, one might suggest, further reinforces the existence and borders of the community, and various scholars of ethnicity (Eriksen 2002) have made this point in that regard. Hence, in terms of understanding the UAR’s response to the election of BNP councillors as ritual it might be fruitful to compare it to rituals, such as public execution, which appear to involve casting an individual out of the community. We might, indeed, submit that, in line with Leach’s understanding of ritual, UAR members are communicating to themselves and to the BNP members – who are part of their broader community –

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19 For critique and development of Turner’s model see, for example, Eade and Sallnow (1991) or Dutton (2006).

20A similar argument, in fact, has been made with regard to the use of the word ‘racist’ which Ray Honeyford has suggested is a means by which anti-Nazis can cast people out of their community. (Quoted in Bonnett, p.158.)
that they are no longer to be regarded as part of that community.

Conclusion

Although the political goal of the UAR in engaging in public demonstrations that vilify the BNP is obvious, the main purpose of this article was to examine the plausibility of relating the UAR’s reaction to BNP election victories to ritual dynamics that seek to maintain internal cohesion within the UAR. The organized protest by UAR members against the election of BNP councillors, and specifically their attending a council meeting in Burnley, can be understood as an example of the use of ritual to remedy what the UAR sees as a taboo. We noted the nature of taboo and demonstrated that taboo is something liminal which challenges the order of a set system of categorisation. We also noted the utility of ritual in remedying taboo and liminality, and showed the extent to which, at least for the UAR, the BNP – and certainly their election successes – would appear to exemplify a taboo and thus precipitate a level of liminality that would require a solution through ritual. The BNP are taboo in the eyes of the UAR because their views on racial nationalism, and the support they have received from segments of the British working class, cause the theoretical structure of UAR’s categories in relation to Britain to be left open debate. Furthermore, their electoral success is taboo because it demonstrates that segments of society are liminal in relation to matters of race, and this challenges the UAR’s view that racism is wrong and also challenges the view that the interests of the working-class are to be served only by solutions from the left. The response is consequently a ritual which is repeated on such occasions as the one noted in Burnley. Indeed, in this regard we have noted the ritualistic dynamics of UAR’s protest in Burnley but also more generally. UAR’s response to BNP electoral success can be understood not only as a propaganda gambit, but also as a ritualistic group response to a taboo that challenges the coherence of its ideological structure.

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