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Introduction to the Special Issue on Liminal Hotspots

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Abstract

This paper introduces the Special Issue on liminal hotspots. A liminal hotspot is an occasion during which people feel that they are caught suspended in the circumstances of a transition that has become permanent. The liminal experiences of ambiguity, uncertainty and paradox that are characteristically at play in transitional circumstances acquire an enduring quality that can be glossed as a ‘hotspot’. The origins of the concept are described followed by an overview of the contributions to the Special Issue.

Keywords: Liminality. Transition. Affectivity.

This Special Issue builds upon an Exploratory Workshop funded by the European Science Foundation entitled ‘Liminal hotspots: Conceptualising the dynamics of suspended transition’. The workshop was led by Paul Stenner, Monica Greco and

Johanna Motzkau, with Megan Clinch as the dedicated Research Associate. Twenty-four academics from a variety of disciplines gathered over a series of meetings to focus on a novel psychosocial subject matter: *liminal hotspots*. We initially defined a liminal hotspot as an occasion of sustained uncertainty, ambivalence and tension in which people feel ‘caught suspended’ in the limbo of an in-between phase of transition. They may be occasions of *impasse* in which an interruption of the everyday, taken for granted state of affairs becomes permanent and the people involved become stuck, as it were, in enduring liminality. This means that a liminal hotspot does not refer to an observable object: it is a happening, rather than a thing; an event, rather than an entity. It does not passively wait for us to describe it, rather it *occurs* as an emergent feature of the play of particular circumstances: circumstances in which the usual normative orders are for whatever reason suspended or disrupted.

The task of the Exploratory Workshop was to sharpen and substantiate this concept through collective discussion of a variety of empirical cases familiar to participantsⁱ. The concept of liminal hotspots has thus gone through a series of phases. First, influenced by Szokolczai’s bold development of the concept of liminality (see also Thomassen, 2014) it was initially coined by Paul Stenner in a series of arguments addressing the transformative dimensions of emotional events, through a theoretical linkage of the concept of liminality with that of affectivity (Stenner, 2011, 2015, 2016). It was then collaboratively developed in relation to Johanna Motzkau’s genealogical work on the concept of suggestibility as a liminal resource in practices of psychology and law (e.g. 2009); Monica Greco’s work on the conceptual history of psychosomatic medicine and on the sociology of medically unexplained symptoms (e.g. 1998; 2004; 2012); and Megan Clinch’s (2010) work on the medical treatment of thyroid conditions. As a next phase, it was collectively elaborated in the workshop

described above, and the current special issue presents a sample of the work that resulted.

The opening paper from Monica Greco and Paul Stenner unpacks the process-theoretical basis of the concept, and introduces a number of subsidiary concepts including paradox, paralysis, polarization and pattern shift. A *limen* is not just a line or a boundary serving as limit between one space or time and another, but a sensitive threshold which mediates transformation as one form-of-process *becomes* another. Any event of becoming presupposes the creation and operation of such delicate and volatile tipping or turning points. Using examples drawn from the field of health, Greco and Stenner show how being held suspended between different forms-of-process yields paradoxes which can paralyse activity and engender distinctive forms of *liminal affectivity*. They situate these problematics within the broader historical context of societies defined by increasing complexity and functional interdependence between different spheres of activity, such that liminal experience becomes less the exception than the rule.

The next two papers deal with relatively ‘micro’ level cases of liminal hotspots. Jette Kofoed and Paul Stenner explore a case involving a group of young people in a Danish school. A young woman called Sana – who has recently arrived from a different school - becomes the object of gossip and criticism amongst her new classmates. The analysis shows how the liminal affectivity generated by a background of issues around inclusion/exclusion becomes extended and amplified through a series of episodes, such that Sana’s transition becomes a liminal hotspot. To engage more deeply with the affectivity at play, Kofoed and Stenner report an altered auto-ethnography in which they reflect on their own experiences of ‘inclusion-as-exclusion’ that were prompted by their engagement with Sana’s story.

Giazú Enciso, Joan Pujol, Johanna Motzkau and Miroslav Popper apply the analytic of liminal hotspots to a case in which a Catalanian man finds himself caught suspended between what they call a monogamous mode of ordering (a concept functionally equivalent to form-of-process) and an emergent *polyamorous* mode. Encountering troubles in his monogamous relationship after falling in love with another, 'John' is faced with the paradox of simultaneously loving his monogamous partner (because he retains strong feelings) and not loving her (because his new love proves the unreality of the old according to the semantics of monogamous exclusivity). Engaging with the idea of polyamory allows John to deparadoxify the resulting paralysis, but he is unable to transition to a polyamorous lifestyle in the absence of the agreement of his lovers. Enciso et al. discuss different theoretical understandings of the liminal hotspot that results, and situate their case in the broader sociological context of 'liquid' modernity with its 'reflexive' relationships.

The next paper takes us to the context of political mobilisation. Mie Scott and Bjorn Thomassen make a case for analysing the recent uprisings in Kiev, Ukraine as a liminal hotspot characterised by heightened affectivity and liminal experience, but also suspended in the sense that no clear resolution has been forthcoming. Using interviews and informal talks with young protesters during spring 2014, they show how the uprising involved classic features of liminality such as the suspension of ordinary rules, a fundamental questioning of power structures and political legitimacy, an order turned upside-down, a situation marked by volatility, ambivalence and potentiality, and the embryonic formation of a *communitas*.

Then follow two primarily theoretical contributions. First, Sergio Salvatore and Claudia Venuleo's paper theorises liminal transitions in semiotic terms. They show

how hotspots emerge as a byproduct of a dynamic of sensemaking involving the relations of an observable side of meaning to a non-observable background of generalized meaning (which supplies the ‘semiotic scenario’ against which the former shows up as interpretable). In a liminal hotspot – characterised by its pre-semantic and affective nature - the semiotic scenario keeps a prior version of the self ‘alive’ despite changes occurring in the real world.

Arpad Szakalczai’s contribution defines permanent liminality as the sense of unreality or loss of reality that occurs when a temporary suspension of everyday taken for granted states of affairs becomes permanent. Since for Szakalczai permanent liminality is not a positive experience, he uses his paper to think about how best to escape it. His message is clear. Reason alone will not suffice since conditions of permanent liminality lack the stability and proportion that are necessary for reason to gain purchase on practice. Something more fundamental and embodied is required if reason is not to short-circuit itself into liminal hotspots, and here Szakalczai reaches for the notion of the ‘heart’. A return to the thought of Pascal is recommended if we are to avoid the bifurcation of reason and emotion established since Kant.

The final two papers unpack some of the practical and applied relevance of the new concept. Drawing upon a wealth of experience with social workers who help young drug users in Denmark, Morten Nissen and Kathrine Solgaard Sørensen address the practical and power-saturated problem of client motivation in psychological interventions. They go straight to the point by defining motivation in this context as the paradoxical imposition of a required desire reconstructed as a psychological essence. Beginning thus with the hotspot dynamics of a paradox-engendered impasse, the paper uses the analytic of liminal hotspots to critically unpack the development of a number of pragmatic motivational techniques. Reframing their data from recorded

counseling sessions, they illustrate how the concept of liminal hotspots opens up new possibilities which go far beyond such techniques as motivational interviewing or solution-focused brief therapy. In their treatment, liminal hotspots can occasion the *emergence* of motives which cannot be evaluated by pre-given standards, but call in turn for emergent user-driven standards.

Last but not least, Johanna Motzkau and Megan Clinch show how practices in medicine and law can be punctuated by paradoxes that expose pragmatic and conceptual ‘voids’ and gaps. Police officers interviewing child witnesses encounter voids where the implications of required child-centredness collide with the principles of evidence gathering. Similar hotspots (‘treatment gaps’) emerge in the practice of medical professionals diagnosing and treating thyroid disease at points where evidence-centred and patient-centred logics of care collide and create mutual interference. By juxtaposing these two practice cases they explore liminal hotspots’ ability to capture practitioners’ experience of resulting practice stalemates, and its capacity to provoke novel thinking and agency towards innovation in practice areas notoriously resistant to change and improvement.

It is clear that what we have offered in this special issue is only a start. Much more can be said about the theoretical framework, and the cases addressed, and there are many further applications in numerous fields. Taken together, however, the papers indicate the fecundity of the concept, and highlight some unexpected commonalities connecting problems that would usually be treated in a disciplinary fashion, as if they were worlds apart. Of particular interest is the notion that liminal hotspots may be proliferating as part of the de-differentiating dynamic of late modern social systems dominated by the economic register and by the problematic of controlling unstable heterophonic social practices. In this broad context, the concept of liminal hotspots

nevertheless encourages attention to the *experiential* dimension. It is thus at core a psychological concept, but one with rich transdisciplinary potential. In this sense it is part of a psychosocial orientation with a focus on embodied persons in social practice, rather than individuals in abstract. If we recall Pascal's ideas about the heart, we are encouraged to view human beings as inseparable from their physical and social environments during each occasion of their ongoing existence.

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ⁱ We used an innovative ‘reflexive team’ methodology based loosely on Anderson (1985) in which the author of a given case (called a focus-hotpot) was interviewed about that case in front of a reflexive team who fed back on the resonances between the focus hotspot and their own cases. The observations of the reflexive team were in turn commented upon by an audience, with the aim of identifying and discussing links and disjunctions to be reported back in a plenary session.