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NEW YEAR'S EVE AS THE GLOBALIZED FESTIVAL
(A SMALL CONTRIBUTION TO UGO PERONE'S
BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION)

Abstract

There is a universal holiday. A holiday that is celebrated nowadays everywhere in the world regardless of religion, tradition, nation, class, wealth, gender or else: New Year's Eve, Sylvester's night. New Year's Eve has become a mixture of all kinds of celebrations well known from several traditional cultures. New Year's Eve is at the same time both a traditional and a modern festival. The modern world is future-oriented. This is why the common festival of the modern world is also future-oriented. There is no grain of fundamentalism in the celebration of New Year, since everyone is welcome. Only those who reject the invitation to join are suspect. New Year's Eve is certainly not majestic, not high-tuned, yet those who celebrate the new year all around the world will be ready, perhaps a little tipsy, to embrace all the others who join them in the festival.

The Bible commands that after having worked for six days, we should rest on the seventh. This day should be different from all others: a day of solid pleasures, of contemplation, a day dedicated to God. A day which divides the “before” and the “after,” a border, a measure, “*peras*,” as the ancient Greeks said. The festive day repeats itself rhythmically, too frequently to call for extravagancy. Yet, Jews and Christians wear their best clothes on the seventh day, prepare a better meal, go to church or to the temple, spend more time together with their families, chat with their neighbors. In the country, peasants share one or several glasses of wine and spirit with their friends, get drunk, sing, and feel happy. For Jews, making love on Sabbath is a “*mizve*” (a good deed).

The arrival of Spring, Summer, Fall, or Winter was always cause for celebration. Rites and festivals flourished to welcome the new seasons. In different places, different people welcomed them very differently. In the case of seasons, there is, again, a “before” and an “after.” The celebrations arose around the turning point, at the border, as the measure. As border and measure, those festive days commanded different ways of speaking, of behaving, different ways of acting, compared with those “normally” accepted during the “before” and the “after.” The “normal” dividing line between permitted and unpermitted, expected and unexpected was up to a degree shifted or lifted.

Those turning points in the rejuvenation of nature were always, and in all the places known to us, connected to the celebration of supra-natural powers, which were believed

to be the ultimate causes of both abundance and scarcity. They could be the spirits of the ancestors, gods, demons, etc. Since those envious powers needed to be reconciled, plenty of sacrifices were presented to them, including human sacrifices. During the Roman Saturnalia, the celebration of the god Saturnus, which in December lasted for seven days, was an occasion not just for a whole week of merry-making, but also for drinking bouts, orgies, and all kinds of violence.

After the emergence of the monotheistic religions, celebrating nature will be connected to the celebration of the Creator of nature. Some of the seasonal turning points will acquire a very specific religious significance, for they will present and represent not just a turning point of seasons but also turning points in religion, and, what is even more, a turning point in the world, in history, precisely in redemption history. Those redemptive turning points are inscribed in the long term cultural memory. Not all turning points acquire equal significance. The religious connotations of Purim or Fasching, as occasions of merriment, of masked carnivals, are less significant than those of Easter or Christmas.

While acquiring religious significance, the temporality of certain “natural” holidays changes radically. It changes in two directions. (Since my knowledge of Islam is limited, I only presume that the situation is similar, but cannot say it for sure.) First, the circularity of seasons is replaced by historicity. Events, miracles are celebrated, which, unlike the arrival of seasons, do not happen every year but happened only once, once upon a time. It happened only once that Jews were liberated by God from Egyptian slavery; it happened only once that Christ was born, and once that he was crucified. Yet, what happened only once is not remembered as something that happened a long time ago. To the contrary, what happened once is happening here and now, in the present, in the absolute present time. That is, in the monotheistic religious imagination, circularity is replaced by historicity, eternity, and simultaneity.

To celebrate saints, Catholicism sprinkles the whole calendar full with a great variety of holidays. Some of them get connected with the traditional “season” celebrations. Like Midsummer Night as the celebration of St. John the Baptist. These holy days are occasion for merriment, drinking, eating, love-making, and so on. Processions, pilgrimages, practicing colorful old pagan customs in Christian costumes make these events lovable, memorable, and not just for the believers.

Public festivals of this kind can also be combined with family celebrations. Such as (by Catholics) the name-day. A name-day differs essentially from a birthday. The celebration of one’s birthday is a through and through private, personal, and family business, whereas the celebration of one’s name day is more public, given that anyone’s name day can be found out from the calendar. There are also collective memory days for mourning, such as All Saints day. People remember their dead on exactly the same day, as it is a religious habit.

Yet, none of the briefly enumerated holidays is universal. An important holiday in one religion is no holiday in another and the rites of celebration can be entirely different according to countries, places, and classes even within the same religion, depending on the local, even pagan, heritage.

There are not only general turning points of seasons, but also turning points of human life: birth, maturation (just for boys), marriage, death. The traditional ways to

celebrate or to mourn on these occasions have their own choreography, prescribed by one or the other system of beliefs. Even secular celebrations imitate the traditional choreographies of their own cultural heritage. Weddings are, perhaps, the most widespread occasions for eating, drinking, dancing, being in a festival mood for several days. And, surely, for spending a lot of money.

Whereas in religious holidays celebrations manifest the unity of history and eternity, the so-called national holidays are only historical.

We can speak of national holidays only from the time of the emergence of the nation states, although local holidays in a similar spirit were known much before this time. National holidays are normally tied to the – perhaps fictional – establishment of a nation state, to a turning point of its history, to the life of significant statesmen or kings, to victorious wars, revolutions, and the like. No nation state celebrates the national holiday of another state.

There is no eternity here. The celebrated event (e.g., the establishment of the state, victory in a glorious war, etc.) is not happening here and now. Celebrating means here to remember ancient times, times gone, never returning. One celebrates or rather remembers a great national event that happened 200, or 150 or 76 years ago, and one needs to remember the correct number of years of the time passed. “We celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of our heroic deed in and at...” Normally, kings, prime ministers or presidents of a current government give speeches in which they present themselves as the true heirs of the glorious past, and reassure their people that their government is the best of all. Despite the boredom of official speeches, such national holidays might also have their popular traditions, rites, and ceremonies. The crowd may applaud and the streets can celebrate. A long time ago, Rousseau anticipated great republican popular festivals. And occasionally such popular festivals will really take place, the streets will be full of merry-making, singing, dancing, and perhaps also of merry, playful demonstrations, like on May Day. Needless to say, all nations have their own national holidays, they cannot share even their half-national, half-religious ones, like Thanksgiving in the United States.

People love to celebrate. Since in modernity religious holidays occupy smaller and smaller places in the calendar, other occasions may replace them in addition to national holidays. For example, balls, music festivals, dance festivals, and literature festivals. They offer entertainment for specific interest groups, for people of the same social stratum or similar wealth, or for people sharing the same interest or taste. Yet they never offer much for people beyond a definite circle. The sole occasion nowadays for general merry-making within a nation is a significant victory of their national soccer team. Needless to say, the event that prompts an outburst of dancing, singing, and kissing for one people will be the cause of grief and mourning for another.

What is the result of this short inquiry? First: there is no single universal celebration or festival. All of them are particular or local. What one group celebrates, the other does not. Even the same holiday can be celebrated in entirely different ways in different countries, cities, and villages. Second: festivals can offer different possibilities and establish also different limits. On the day of fools, the servant can give orders to the master yet cannot beat the master up. In some cases, dress codes are lifted (in the case of

carnivals, by definition) although sexual license is not permitted. In some others, orgies can take place (for example, in Rome). Sometimes, there is no limit to eating, drinking, and sexual acts of any kind, yet there can be still limits concerning violence against equals. We can see what happens if one crosses a limit in the state of intoxication in Euripides' drama *Bacchae*.

There is, however, a universal holiday. A holiday that is celebrated nowadays everywhere in the world regardless of religion, tradition, nation, class, wealth, gender or else: New Year's Eve, Sylvester's night. Once upon a time, January 1 was a holiday because of Christ's circumcision. No one remembers this "occasion" anymore. What all of us celebrate is not something that happened in the past. New Year's Eve has nothing to do with memory. It has to do with something entirely different: daydream, expectation, hope. We celebrate a common birth. The birth of a child all the inhabitants of our earth share. The birth of our common baby, which will live for some 365 days. We do not know yet how it will develop – we hope for the best. Yet, if it turns bitter, then, after some 365 days, a new baby will be born and we can rest our hope on the next one.

Turn on your television set on Sylvester Night. What you see will be fireworks all around our globe. We start with an island where the new year arrives first, then we continue, hour after hour, to all the places where the new year has already arrived. Until we arrive to our location (celebration on the street, people kissing, etc.). Then we continue with our camera further around the earth, from one firework to another firework, and finally we should arrive to another island where the new year just begins. Then it is over.

Needless to say, not in every culture is Sylvester Night the beginning of the new year. Some cultures have preserved their own traditional calendar and have their own traditional new year and new year celebration. But by now they duplicate the beginning of the new year. Besides welcoming their own, they welcome a shared one. The world has become one.

New Year's Eve has become a mixture of all kinds of celebrations well known from several traditional cultures. First, it has become "multicultural." Fireworks replace Christmas candles, and also camp fires. This signals the continuous shrinking of the night. Welcome the light, welcome the day! Welcome our common daylight. New Year's Eve presents the unity of the old and the new. The old, because New Year's Eve repeats itself every year; the new, because every year can bring something entirely non-expected, essentially new, not in nature, but in history. We thus welcome possibilities, spaces for our action.

New Year's Eve is also a traditional festival. First, it is the night of revelry. We do not sleep while the new arrives, we wait for its arrival. We visit a night performance in a theater, a cinema, watch a cabaret.

Second, this is also the night when many limits of the permitted are lifted for a few hours. It is the night of drinking bouts, eating, dancing, playing games, consulting fortune tellers, and all kinds of merry-making. Whatever we do not do during our weekdays, we do it now, it does not matter at all. This is the night for breaking also sexual taboos. We do something else than usual, we do something we only dreamt about, we forget the cares of weekdays. This is the universal festival.

It is a modern festival. For nobody is obliged to celebrate on the streets with the crowd. One can wait for the arrival of the new year in the circle of one's family or one's friends. One can also choose not to care for the festival at all, go to sleep early, and forget about the universal madness. Why should I do what I like once in a year if I do not do it for 364 days?

On New Year's Eve, we do not remember great victories of our nation, for it is not a national holiday. We do not remember the life of a great saint, for it is no religious holiday. New Year's Eve is not carved into our cultural memory, for it is, to repeat, no part of memory at all. We do not keep in remembrance all the old New Year's celebrations (normally we do not feel that well as we expected), or we only remember those when something important happened in our personal or political life (as I remember Sylvester night of 1944-45).

The modern world is future-oriented. This is why the common festival of the modern world is also future-oriented. There is no grain of fundamentalism in the celebration of New Year, since everyone is welcome. Only those who reject the invitation to join are suspect.

Friedrich Schiller, the great poet, and Ludwig van Beethoven, the great composer, said and wrote "*Seid umschlungen Millionen, diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt* [Be embraced, millions! Take this kiss for all the world]." New Year's Eve is certainly not majestic, not high-tuned, yet those who celebrate the new year all around the world will be ready, perhaps a little tipsy, to embrace all the others who join them in the festival.