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In Tune With the World

A THEORY OF FESTIVITY

Translated from the German by Richard and Clara Winston

A HELEN AND KURT WOLFF BOOK

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II

But, someone may remonstrate, "does not everyone know what a festival is, anyhow?" The question is not altogether irrelevant. However, "If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asks, I know not." This sentence from St. Augustine's *Confessions*,[1] although written in relation to something else, is highly applicable to the concept of festivity. The problem is to put into words what everyone means and knows.

Nowadays, however, we are forcefully "asked" both what a festival is and, even more, what the psychological prerequisites are for celebrating one. "The trick is not to arrange a festival, but to find people who can *enjoy* it." The man who jotted down this aphorism nearly one hundred years ago was Friedrich Nietzsche;[2] his genius, as this sentence once again illustrates, lay to no small degree in that seismographic sensitivity to what was to come. The implication is that festivity in general is in danger of extinction, for arrangements alone do not make a festival. Since Nietzsche's day it has become a more or less standard matter to connect the "misery of this present age" with "man's incapacity for festivity." [3] We may, of course, suspect that this gloomy diagnosis rather oversimplifies. In all ages, the chances are, it was never easy to meet

the requirement that great festivals be celebrated in the proper spirit. As the history of religions tells us,[4] empty and wearisome pomp existed even at the Greek festivals. Nevertheless, it is peculiar to our time that we may conceive of festivity itself as being expressly repudiated. This very situation gives rise to the "question," prompts us to decide for ourselves what presumably everybody knows and takes for granted: namely, what the essence of festivity is, and what should be done so that men in our time can preserve or regain the capacity to celebrate real festivals festively —a capacity which concerns the heart of life, and perhaps constitutes it. Mere description of classical or medieval or even East Indian festivals, no matter how accurate and stirring, does not further our aim at all. Even a "morphology," stylistic history, or sociology of festivals would not especially help us.[5] Such studies not only fail to answer the question; they do not even touch it. We must attack the question in a far more fundamental sense.

But does not celebrating a festival mean simply the equivalent of having a good time? And does not everyone know what that is? Perhaps so—but again a few questions arise. What *is* a good time? Does anything of the sort exist? May it not be that the only kind of good time that is really possible is a time of good work?

These are questions we cannot answer unless we have a conception of man. For what is involved is the fulfillment of human life, and the form in which this fulfillment is to take place. Inevitably, therefore, we find ourselves concerned with such ideas as "the perfection of man," "eternal life," "bliss," "Paradise." Now, there is little point in learning what any individual thinks all on his own about such fundamental matters, no matter how original his ideas may be. In this realm, we should be wary of originality. It is more rewarding to consider what the tradition of humanity's wisdom, into which the thought of whole generations has entered, has to tell us. To be sure, we need scarcely expect that this tale will be easy to decipher.

The traditional name for the utmost perfection to which man

may attain, the fulfillment of his being, is *visio beatifica,* the "seeing that confers bliss." This is to say that the highest intensification of life, the absolutely perfect activity, the final stilling of all volition, and the partaking of the utmost fullness that life can offer, takes place as a kind of seeing; more precisely, that all this is achieved in seeing awareness of the divine ground of the universe.[6]

Incidentally, the tradition in which this view may be found extends much further back than the Christian centuries, perhaps back beyond historical time altogether. A few generations before Plato, the Greek Anaxagoras, in answer to the question of what he had been born for, replied: "For seeing." And in Plato's *Symposium* Diotima clearly expresses the traditional wisdom of the *visio beatifica:* "This is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of divine beauty; this makes man immortal." [7]

But eschatology alone is not the issue; the traditional wisdom does not speak only of the ultimate perfection of life in the "hereafter." It speaks also of man as an earthly being appearing in history, and asserts that man by nature craves the appeasement of his yearnings through seeing. In this present life also, the utmost happiness takes the form of contemplation.[8] "Most of all we esteem the sense of sight," Aristotle says in the very beginning of his *Metaphysics.* And Pierre Teilhard de Chardin belongs to the same tradition when he suggests (in the remarkable chapter on vision which surprisingly opens his book, *The Phenomenon of Man*) that all life is comprehended within seeing, and that the whole evolution of the cosmos aims above all at "the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes." [9]

Such "earthly" contemplation can take a good many different forms. It may be the philosopher's consideration of the Whole of existence; or the particular vision of the artist, who seeks to penetrate to the prototypal images of things in the universe; or the contemplative prayer of one absorbed in the divine mysteries. Whenever anyone succeeds in bringing before his mind's eye the hidden

ground of everything that is, he succeeds to the same degree in performing an act that is meaningful in itself, and has a "good time."

From this it follows that the concept of festivity is inconceivable without an element of contemplation. This does not mean exerting the argumentative intellect, but the "simple intuition" of reason; not the unrest of thought, but the mind's eye resting on whatever manifests itself. It means a relaxing of the strenuous fixation of the eye on the given frame of reference, without which no utilitarian act is accomplished. Instead, the field of vision widens, concern for success or failure of an act falls away, and the soul turns to its infinite object; it becomes aware of the illimitable horizon of reality as a whole.

Ethnological and historico-cultural writers have often pointed out that "a union of peace, intensity of life, and contemplation" [10] is essential for festivity, so that to celebrate a festival is equivalent to "becoming contemplative and, in this state, directly confronting the higher realities on which the whole of existence rests." [11] Such observations accord completely with everyone's experience. Bustle does not make a festival; on the contrary, it can spoil one. Of course this does not mean that a festival is simply contemplation and recollection of self; any such claim is clearly belied by experience. Nevertheless, we cling to the feeling that a special spice, essential to the right celebration of a festival, is a kind of expectant alertness. One must be able to look through and, as it were, beyond the immediate matter of the festival, including the festal gifts; one must engage in a listening, and therefore necessarily silent, meditation upon the fundament of existence.

The only truly legitimate reason for a day free from work is this form of recognition of what is meaningful in itself. In a work written by Thomas Aquinas[12] in his youth this idea is expressed in an unusual way. He comments that the Roman philosopher Seneca was not so wrong in his mockery of the Jewish Sabbath for being filled with empty rituals. For, he says, such a day is not lost, *non*

amittitur, only "if that is done on the Sabbath for which it is appointed: the contemplation of divine things," *divinorum contemplatio.*

The antithesis between holiday and workday, or more precisely, the concept of the day of rest, tells us something further about the essence of festivity. The day of rest is not just a neutral interval inserted as a link in the chain of workaday life. It entails a loss of utilitarian profit. In voluntarily keeping the holiday, men renounce the yield of a day's labor. This renunciation has from time immemorial been regarded as an essential element of festivity.[13] A definite span of usable time is made, as the ancient Romans understood it, "the exclusive property of the gods." [14] As the animal for sacrifice was taken from the herd, so a piece of available time was expressly withdrawn from utility.[15] The day of rest, then, meant not only that no work was done, but also that an offering was being made of the yield of labor. It is not merely that the time is not gainfully used; the offering is in the nature of a sacrifice, and therefore the diametric opposite of utility.

It scarcely need be said that in a world governed by the concept of utility, there can be no time set aside on principle, any more than there can be land set aside on principle. Anyone who called for it would be accused of "sabotaging work." For that very reason the totalitarian laboring society must of necessity be an altogether unfestive society, just as it is marked by scarcity and impoverishment even when there is the greatest abundance of material goods. Similarly, the man who is limited to absolutely utilitarian activity, to the *artes serviles,* and who is thus "proletarianized" in that sense, has rightly been called "unfestive." [16] On the other hand, voluntary renunciation of the yield of a working day cuts through the principle of calculating utility, and the principle of poverty also. Even in conditions of extreme material scarcity, the withholding from work, in the midst of a life normally governed by work, creates an area of free surplus.

This, then, unexpectedly brings us to a new aspect of a holiday.

A festival is essentially a phenomenon of wealth; not, to be sure, the wealth of money, but of existential richness. Absence of calculation, in fact lavishness, is one of its elements. Of course there is a natural peril and a germ of degeneration inherent in this. The way is open to senseless and excessive waste of the yield of work, to an extravagance that violates all rationality. The product of a whole year's labor can be thrown away on a single day. As is well known, men are quite capable of such behavior. But this potential perversion cannot be included within the definition of festivity, as has recently been done.[17] We may properly say that every festival conceals within itself "at least a germ of excess";[18] but it is highly misleading if festival itself is defined as *"le paroxysme de la société,"*[19] as a submergence in "creative" chaos. True enough, the fact remains that the paramountcy of a calculating, economizing mentality prevents both festive excess and festivity itself. In the workaday world all magnificence and pomp is calculated, and therefore unfestive. The myriad lights of a commercialized Christmas inevitably seem basically meager, without any real radiance. We remember G. K. Chesterton's keen comment on the dazzling advertisements of Times Square at night: What a glorious sight for those who luckily do not know how to read.

Such an act of renunciation and sacrificial offering, however, cannot be imagined as being performed at random. The talk of "valuable working time" is, after all, not just talk; something utterly real is involved. Why should anyone decide to sacrifice this precious article without sufficient reason? If we probe a little more insistently for a reason, we find a curious analogy to the other, the contemplative aspect of the day of rest, of which we have already spoken. The achievement of contemplation, since it is the seeing, the intuition of the beloved object,[20] presupposes a specific nonintellectual, direct, and existential relation to reality, an existential concord of man with the world and with himself. Precisely in the same way, the act of freely giving oneself cannot take place unless it likewise grows from the root of a comprehensive affirmation

—for which no other term can be found than "love." In spite of the thickets of banality, sentimentality, and unrealistic spiritualization that threaten to smother the true meaning of this word, it remains indispensable. There is no other word that so precisely denotes what is at issue.

We do not renounce things, then, except for love. This hypothesis will have to be examined more closely. Nevertheless, we have not advanced it without considerable thought. Above all, we hope that it will serve as a new vantage point from which we will be able to see more deeply into the idea as well as the actuality of festivity.