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The Revolutionary Importance Of Celebration & Cyclical Time

Editorial Segadores and Col·lectiu Bauma

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If it is strange to say that celebration and cyclical time are of revolutionary importance, it is precisely because they are not issues that have received too much emphasis in today's anti-capitalist environments. However, for the State, they have not been unimportant issues: on the contrary. The State has fought hard to impose the Roman calendar – the most powerful artifact of the most powerful Western empire of antiquity – on both its subjects in Europe and its subjects in the colonies around the world. What are the features of its calendar? Months divorced from the moon and any other natural rhythm, weeks based on the commercial cycle (with days bearing the names of the gods of the empire with some Catholic modification for the last two, thus imposing a spiritual homogeneity upon the whole empire) and, above all, a linear count of the years beginning – approximately – with the birth of the central figure of the imperial religion.

Within a reality that is precisely defined by its cyclical nature, a rhythmic and circular progression that is one of the main ways for people outside the State to relate to nature and get to know the changes of the earth intimately, it gives us a system of measurements that makes no reference to the earth, or the moon, or the seasons, or any other natural cycle. It is no mystery why the Roman Empire, and later the Catholic Church, imposed this calendar. What is mysterious is why many revolutionaries who fight against domination have not insisted on abolishing the concept of linear, statist and alienated time and on creating tools that make it easier for us to develop another concept.

In the same way, the conquest of celebration was key to the extension of State-Catholic power throughout Europe, the subsequent colonial extension to other continents, and the universal extension of capitalism on the same ground already conquered. When they did not have the power to annihilate often eco-centric, indigenous, and matri-focal [*ed. – central stable figure in families being female*] spiritualities, both in Europe and Western Asia and the Americas, Catholics recuperated them, turning revered spirits or ancestors into saints and turning goddesses into different aspects of the Virgin Mary. The Christianity of Constantine [*ed. – Roman Emperor who made it State religion*] was absolutely misogynistic. If the Virgins later abounded and Mary appeared as a fourth deity apart from the trinity, it was only because this was the only way the monks and bishops had to incorporate and domesticate the strongly anti-patriarchal paganism they found at the limits of their expanding empire. By controlling celebrations, they could subordinate the pagan figures so that in the end the people would be worshiping Jesus, the Pope, the State itself.

everything. They crowned a clown as a “king,” made fun of them ruthlessly and sometimes forced some village officer from secular and religious authorities to dress absurdly, ride a pig or a goat and receive all sorts of insults.

In short, it was a good day for ordinary people, and it is no mystery why in their war against a new enemy – industrial capitalism – they chose it to call a general strike.

For centuries, its memory, its celebrations and its more cyclical and ecocentric concept of time were a very strong weapon in the struggle against the State and also a tool for building a communal, supportive and rebellious life.

Today, to face an all-powerful capitalism, we need these weapons and tools more than ever. Time is one more terrain on which we struggle; as we recover it, it will provide us with advantages on all other fronts, it will facilitate us cultivating healthier relationships with other people and our environment from which to better organize ourselves, avoiding burning ourselves out.

that centers our experiences, our stories, our imaginaries; we interrupt the amnesic spectacle of capitalism that tells us “what you have in front of you is everything; nothing else has ever existed.” We create a bond with our ancestors, we make their memory our memory and so, again, we improve our strategies.

A brief review of the history of May Day¹¹ can illustrate very well the importance of celebrations and critical memory. All anti-capitalists know the events of Haymarket in 1886 and the subsequent execution of the Chicago Martyrs.¹² But the Haymarket rally was on May 4th, convened to protest a series of police raids on the day of the general strike, May 1st. Few people remember that historic general strike was called for May 1st because, at the time, many recently-proletarianized workers – people who still preserved a peasant memory – still celebrated Beltaine [*ed. – as the holiday is known in Celtic-derived traditions*] as a popular day, a day of revolt, associated with the imaginary of the world turned upside down¹³ and with the dances around the maypole. In these dances, all the people of the village danced around a mayo (a tall pole decorated with colorful fabrics). This was a symbol of fertility and a celebration of the earth and spring. At times, dancing and feasting developed in an even more communal and libertine way that totally rejected Catholic morality and its hatred of bodies, the earth, abundance, and pleasure.

The world turned upside down was a celebration, and also a kind of protest and a revolutionary horizon very present in the Middle Ages and which in the rural world would survive the spiritual austerity of the Enlightenment.¹⁴ It was about turning the whole social order on its head. Many times people put on clothes assigned to the other gender, put the last first and first last, didn’t work, imagined a world where the poor had ev-

¹¹ ed. – see Return Fire vol.3 pg87

¹² ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg86

¹³ ed. – see 23 Theses Concerning Revolt

¹⁴ ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg48

The next counter-revolution was that carried out by the Protestants.¹ Capturing the real, widespread and ingrained rage against Catholic corruption, they waged battle against the Virgins and celebration itself, gutting religion to wipe out Mary and reduce the hundreds of celebrations and festivities of medieval Christianity to leave only two or three of the most austere. The subversive bacchanal – which had survived some 1,200 years of ecocidal, misogynistic, homophobic, corpophobic (hating bodies and earth) and regimented Christianity – had died.

So, if much of the year was not for celebration, what was it for?

The answer is simple: to work. The counter-revolution of the Protestant Reformation paved the way for the ruthless advance of capitalism, reaching in a couple of centuries – and much faster, for enslaved Africans – a reality in which people without capital were supposed to work about 363 days a year.² They had no other value: they were useless. And what concept of celebration do we have within revolutionary movements? For many of us, our referents are Durruti³ and Makhno,⁴ men who did not even stop when wounded in battle. We have inherited a model of militancy that surpasses even Protestantism’s productivism. We do not recognize “holy days”; that is pure superstition. We now intend to dedicate the 365 days of the year to the work of the revolution. We are the only people for whom a strike means a lot of work.

By this we do not mean to equate imposed discipline with self-discipline. Frantically engaging in a task of our own choosing – which arises from our desire and will – is one of the great-

¹ ed. – see ‘The Scarcity Dynamo’

² Every day except Christmas and Saint Stephen. The total number of working days was considerably reduced thanks to the labor movement throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

³ ed. – see Return Fire vol.1 pg86

⁴ ed. – see Return Fire vol.2 pg45

est joys of life. While we claim the “right to laziness,” we also claim all the hard work that is usually needed to organize ourselves, for example, in an effective and combative strike. Our critique is aimed at how, sometimes, revolutionaries do not realize the new dominant trend of power. In the nineteenth century, when Christianity was already obsolete and science was the new religion of the State, many revolutionaries were enthusiastic about denouncing the church and vindicating rationalism, or proclaiming how new technologies would set us free (a mistake repeated by techno-enthusiasts of the early 21st century with respect to the internet).⁵

Our critique is about how a revolutionary culture has unconsciously adopted a trend of Puritanism⁶ – productivism – and has paid no heed to the question of celebration, rather than understanding the great importance of this aspect of life.

Nor is it real, the model we criticize. Like any model, it is a fiction, a narrative that we tell ourselves to make visible or reward certain things and to hide others. We don’t know anyone who dedicates all their time “to the revolution,” but a majority who want to pretend they do. The truth is that almost all of them put a lot of effort into celebrating every weekend. What we are worshiping is capitalism, the temporal structure that divides – in a totally artificial way – time into seven-day segments to make it easier for people to self-deceive themselves that they are not devoting their entire lives to the wage labor regime. but “only” five or six days. So every five or six days, every weekend, they have to celebrate the end of the usual ordeal. But it is not a celebration of life, of the body, of our health, of the land that has fed and supported us so that we can survive another week of exploitation, nor is it a celebration of our endurance, our dreams outside of the misery of capitalism. It is a celebration of capitalism itself, because it is a ritual of forget-

ting. Like the obligatory oblivion imposed by any dictatorship, the weekend is an amnesic’s holiday, a reset of our being and our memory, achieved with the help of the drugs that capitalism itself provides us, in order to break the continuity of time and prepare for another work week.

Not to survive, nor to resist. But to conform.

The notion of time we reproduce and the rationalism it represents wreak havoc on our bodies and our imaginaries. We are not machines. We are not able to maintain a geometric trajectory of militancy.⁷ Revolution is not a linear increase in pressures and forces. It is a storm, it is cyclical, it has its own seasons, like life itself. If we do not learn to adapt to these cycles – and even better, to celebrate them – we will always burn ourselves out,⁸ we will always fall into disappointment, misunderstanding, and bad strategies when a peak, an insurrection, is not followed by revolution. Nor will we know how to adapt to the inevitable changes in our bodies, our relations, our environments.⁹

Conversely, when we celebrate cyclical time, our bond with the earth and our past, we gain a great deal. We gain recognition and appreciation for rhythms and changes, we learn to adapt and be more careful, we do not burn out but mature,¹⁰ we learn when is the most appropriate time for what type of activity and so we also improve our strategies. We gain a stronger and more intimate connection with life, we protect ourselves from capitalist alienation. We improve our emotional and physical health, we find the strength to engage in a struggle that goes far beyond our atomized beings, we discover a philosophical and existential basis for our struggle that breaks with the liberalism and colonialism that have so polluted Western anti-capitalist movements. And we gain the ability to build a reality

⁵ ed. – see ‘From Fringe Prophecy into Voguish Ideology’

⁶ ed. – see Return Fire vol.4 pg89

⁷ ed. – see Memory as a Weapon; Barcelona Anarchists at Low Tide

⁸ ed. – see A Cautious Reply

⁹ ed. – see the supplement to this chapter of Return Fire; The Swell

¹⁰ ed. – see You Are the Good Cause