

ANNIVERSARIES AND JUBILEES

Changing Celebratory Customs in Modern Times

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Every minute, somebody, somewhere is celebrating something. When did customs of celebrating jubilees become a matter of course in festive culture and why and when did we actually start to celebrate them? With the institution of the Holy Year in 1300 an interval of 50 years, later of 25 years, as a celebratory cycle was found which is observed in both secular and Christian celebrations up to the present. Secular jubilees or private anniversaries have a much shorter history. With a few exceptions in early modernity it was not until the nineteenth century that the number of occasions for “celebrating something” started to grow and the differences of celebratory customs broadened.¹

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Do you remember? Let us take a short look back to the year 2005 – Mozart had his two hundred and forty-ninth birthday and Rembrandt van Rijn his three hundred and ninety-ninth – had that been any news for us? Of course it hadn't. But in 2006, the two hundred and fiftieth and four hundredth birthdays of these immortal geniuses were milestones for innumerable events. But we all had our own birthdays, last year as every year – maybe the thirty-ninth or the forty-fourth or even the fiftieth or sixtieth – and every one of us celebrated their own birthday as a personal anniversary in their way.

With the famous w-questions, we can ask who, what, where, when, with whom and how we celebrate and we will quickly find the answers. But one question and one answer is usually left out: why do we celebrate at all?

“The self-evident is the last thing we recognise. It resembles the hare that lies at our very feet” (Jünger 1954: 11).² The self-evident nature, with which all the jubilees and anniversaries are celebrated year by year in increasing number, is taken as a given. The

laying of the foundation stone of the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome five hundred years ago was remembered in 2006 as well as Friedrich von Schiller's two hundredth day of death, and the four hundredth birthday of the foundation of Giessen University in 2007. But why and since when we automatically follow this compulsive mechanism of celebrating round numbers and the commemoration of more or less important jubilees – this is a question seldom or, in fact, only very recently asked.

In a mixture of a consciousness of tradition and convention, birthdays with a zero (in German they are called round birthdays, “runde Geburtstage”) or wedding anniversaries like silver or golden anniversaries are given great attention. That is also the case at work, e.g. twenty-five, forty or fifty years of employment is honoured with gratifications. But particularly commemorations in the public sphere and in the media cannot be thought of without jubilees and anniversaries. Conferences and exhibitions follow the adamant law of the cycles of jubilees as well as communities and businesses – as far away

from any sense of historicity they may be. Just consider the jubilee days of the deaths or births of their founders or their founding acts in the pressure of these dates and decide in almost any case: “we got to do something”.

Commemoration in certain intervals of time is a popular ritual with a certain automatism. In order to authorize all these memorial acts, it is simply enough to remember the fiftieth, hundredth or even thousandth anniversaries or whatever other attractive number is allocated to commemorating a person or a founding act. This demonstrates awareness of history or at least suggests its existence. Institutions and people are making the most of the dignity of their age, while simultaneously formulating a need for admiring the future by producing jubilees. They propose to be entitled to give the only valid interpretation of the past and to marginalize competing patterns. But the cycles of jubilees have their own history with many transformations due to changing historical contexts. Carrying out jubilees and anniversaries as if it were simply natural often lets us forget the historicity of this fabricated construction of time.

Religious Origins of Jubilee Cycles

Before dealing with the question of historicity of jubilee cycles and anniversaries, it is necessary to investigate their roots. Jubilees date back to the Old Testament. Leviticus 25, 8-55 states that after seven times seven years, i.e. after forty-nine years, a “jubil year” is to follow. *Jobel* is the horn of the ram and the playing of the ram horn was the beginning of this special 50th year. “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you return to his property and each of you return to his family”, which means that properties were restored to their original owners and slaves were set free.

The tradition of the jubilee has never really been forgotten during the Middle Ages but the combination of jubilee and the fiftieth year was rather an exception than the rule. The best known exception is the re-burial of Thomas Becket fifty years after his

actual death; on this occasion, the archbishop of Canterbury referred directly to the Leviticus text. Much more often jubilees were not fixed to a strictly defined cycle but could be combined with any kind of indulgence: “every time he is forgiven for his sins is a jubilee for the believer”. Most important for the modern cycle of jubilees was the combination of the fixed fifty-years-cycle and the non-fixed indulgence cycle – and as it is well-known, this was initiated as the Holy Year in 1300 by Pope Boniface VIII. All the Christians who went on a pilgrimage to Rome in this year and visited the seven (and later on four) main churches received a full indulgence and remission of all sins. Due to the theological interpretation of a double remission of sin and punishment, the Holy Year should not be repeated before one hundred years have passed. But the enormous success of the first Holy Year led to the next one not one hundred years later but as soon as in 1350. After a longer time of experimenting with the interval of thirty-three years – the age of Jesus Christ – in 1468, the rhythm which is valid until today came into existence in 1475. To this day the regular Holy Year takes place every twenty-five years. The general unit for measurement of jubilees was found and until today the cycle of jubilees can be divided by twenty-five as a rule (Chase 1990; Mitterauer 1997; 1998; Müller 2004: 9–14).

The success story of the jubilee cycle is rather long. As the twenty-five-year-cycle of the Holy Year was administered by the papacy, this close tie must be removed to make it available in other contexts. One has to take into account that the decimal system did not gain acceptance until the fifteenth century. And to write in Arabic numbers instead of Roman ones did not become popular any earlier. The triumphal march of the clock (in German we have the bizarre word *clockisation*, i.e. “Veruhrzeitlichung”, for this process) and the slow habituation to think in modern calendar years allowed people to precisely handle time and marked spaces of time. These important changes can only be mentioned here but must be kept in mind.

Protestant and Secular Jubilees

The monopoly of the papacy on the jubilee cycle was a delicate problem in secular and non-Catholic contexts. But the attractiveness of this scaling of time must have been so great that ways had to be found to indulge as well. The earliest references to secular jubilees originate from universities. The German universities in Erfurt and Ingolstadt and the university in Basel, Switzerland, gave a special mention of their 100-year-jubilee of their foundation in 1492, 1572, and 1560, not by jubilee events but by works of art. Four universities in Protestant German territories, Tübingen, Heidelberg, Wittenberg and Leipzig, quickly followed with festive ceremonies of their foundation acts one hundred and two hundred years later. In 1578, 1587, 1602 and 1609 these universities celebrated their own history with speeches, opulent banquets, theatre and music and even members of the court attended the festivities which lasted for several days.

These self-representations on the occasion of the one hundred- and two hundred-years-jubilees were not at all self-evident. It was not long ago that the early Reformation had condemned the Roman Holy Year jubilees as “the Pope’s fair”. And now the Protestant theology professors argued against “Papist jubilees which only existed for the purpose of superstition and in order to fulfil the Roman addiction to money” and defamed it as a “wholly godless and damned jubilee feast” and as an “outrageous drudgery and seduction”. So the arguments for using the same appealing time rhythm had to be different, of course. Vice versa the Protestant theologians underlined the “Christian manner” and the “spirit of Christian revival” in which the university jubilees were celebrated (Müller 2004: 23f).

In fact these university jubilees opened the way and the narrow correlation between the Holy Year and the jubilee cycle was definitely dissolved. In the following decades the jubilee cycle was used for many outstanding occasions, particularly by the Protestant churches – for example, the jubilee of Luther’s ninety-five propositions and the beginning of the Reformation in 1617 which was an enormous success. In 1630 the jubilee of the *Confessio Augustana*

followed and in 1655 that of the religious Peace of Augsburg. Catholics harshly criticized particularly the ceremonies of the reformation jubilee in 1617 as “pseudo jubilees”. And the Catholic church, in turn, rediscovered the dignity of old age for jubilees – the Millennium of German cloisters such as Reichenau, Amorbach and Oberaltaich in the early eighteenth century were peaks of historical jubilees in the Roman Catholic church (Müller 2004: 15–24).

But as we know – jubilees and anniversaries have not remained in the churches’ responsibility, but have become a powerful instrument in the process of “confessionalization”. This line will not be pursued further here. Rather, I would like to examine the ways through which the jubilees have made their way from religious to secular realms. A key position was played by the letterpress jubilee of 1640. It was an initiative of five citizens of Leipzig who started a remarkable jubilee festivity for the commemoration of the invention of the letterpress with movable letters two hundred years earlier. They became not only the founders of the tradition of centenary celebrations for this world-changing invention but in a certain sense they have become the founders of another tradition as well. Jubilees have become available for everybody and since then, it was in the responsibility of mankind’s creativity and initiative to find new occasions for jubilees (Zwahr 1996; Müller 2004: 32–34). Jubilees could now be arranged by agreement among the members of social groups who were convinced of the relevance of particular events. When dates were not known exactly one could arbitrarily set a date for a new jubilee. Presumably the five printers of Leipzig did not realize what a key role they played in the history of jubilees but since they proposed their scheme, time for jubilees was found again and again.

The Tri-centenary of Freudenstadt: A Bourgeois, Urban Example

It was not until the nineteenth century that the middle classes discovered the fascination of anniversaries and started to create ever new occasions for bourgeois self-representation. Particularly the jubilees of cities and their founding acts have been sig-

nificant instruments for self-staging their citizens. Although there are some forerunners for early city jubilees around 1700, the summit of these celebratory acts did not start until the middle of the nineteenth century and in Germany particularly after the founding of the Empire in 1871. As an example we will consider the tri-centenary of Freudenstadt in the Black Forest in 1899.

Freudenstadt's case can be seen as a model. It was one of the rather rare cities which really knew the exact date of its foundation. Other cities had to look for other occasions for their jubilees – for the laying of the foundation stone of their churches, for the renovation of historical monuments, for the anniversaries of important historical events or for famous personalities being connected to them by birth or death. The imagination was impressive and the competition between the cities was harsh.

Freudenstadt's three hundred years jubilee combined all important features which have been developed during the nineteenth century. As a rather small and quiet town with less than 6,500 inhabitants, Freudenstadt discovered the possibilities of tourism already in the 1880s and the forthcoming event of the three hundredth anniversary of its ducal foundation in 1899 fit excellently in this scheme. The three-day celebration included everything deemed worthy of representing the town; some of it had already been displayed in numerous other city jubilees in the nineteenth century – the official re-opening of the restored church with a festival service, the opening of a newly erected look-out tower as a special commemoration of the town's founder, ceremonial banquets in the specifically enlarged sports hall, the performance of a play of the town's history and tableaux, a monumental historical procession, fireworks with an Italian night, social gatherings with dance and music, and finally also a children's fête. Even the King of Württemberg and numerous guests of honour visited the celebrations – all presented in a lavishly printed programme. The little town was decorated with gates of honour, flags and arms, garlands and wreaths. And almost all the town people were engaged in the "festive activities which were carried out with great industry and diligence".

Particularly the historical procession is worth looking at in more detail. It was the highlight of the show and attracted a lot of spectators even from afar. A very procession-experienced professor of architecture from Stuttgart was engaged for the organisation. More than 1,200 persons were fitted with costumes specially ordered from Munich; in comparison: in 1890, the much bigger former free city Ulm (36,000 inhabitants) engaged 1,700 participants for its superb historical procession. In Freudenstadt, thirty wagons were splendidly decorated; the necessary work and labour lasted for months. More than two hundred and twenty horses and numerous musical bands were supplied by the military administration – in fact the organisation alone was a huge achievement for such a small town! The historical procession followed the form of others – three parts can be distinguished: the first part was dedicated to concrete occasions of Freudenstadt's history, the second one performed scenes of popular culture such as a wedding procession and showed various groups dressed in regional costumes. The third and last one picked the central themes of agriculture, trade and industry and even tourism. In this last group were mentioned: spa tourists, forest cafés, the Black Forest club, English gentlemen and their butlers, and cyclists. To keep the memory of all these magnificent celebrations alive, commemorative items were sold such as prints of the speeches and new books on Freudenstadt's history (Faix 2001: 11–28).

The Contemporary Explosion of Jubilees

The track record of city jubilees did not end with the nineteenth century. On the contrary, they increased enormously. Nowadays it is not enough to have three-days or one-week celebrations – nowadays the whole year is a never-ending festivity. Preparations start some years in advance by founding organisational committees to stage the most magnificent jubilee ceremonies, new staff in the city's marketing team use all their strength to make the absolute best of it, academic celebrities edit new publications for the occasion not only in one but three, four and more volumes, the possibilities are endless. Everything is tried out; everybody has their own experiences in this field.

For the nineteenth century the city jubilees were said to show the affirmation and the representation of the more and more self-confident bourgeoisie, the strengthening of the “sense of citizenship”, often with a patriotic and national tone. The self-confidence in using symbols demonstrating the values and achievements of the bourgeoisie developed more and more. Jubilees and their celebrations are excellent occasions to gain a deeper insight in the manifestation of mentality of societies and their special structure.

Nowadays there really is an explosion of jubilees and not only of cities but of almost everything. We are all part of an “society of adventure” (Schulze 1992), an event society, and it is down to everybody’s commitment and inclination to participate or not. But looking at all these jubilees – is it really the particular quantity of time or is the number hundred, thousand and so on only a sign and a signal for essential parts which are not yet known and which are only present in the subconscious? As an example: at the centenary of the service club of Rotary International 2005, what have all the guests really celebrated in thousands over thousands of festivities around the world? An institution, a tradition, or themselves? And why did they organise all these celebrations – due to an obligation, due to pride, or as self-assurance? And why have they done it exactly in this way – with ceremonial banquets in decorated halls, with music and speeches?

To the central question “why” everybody knows an answer, but we hesitate to write it down because it seems too naïve. Everybody does it and has always done it. A lot of things have become so normal and conventional that the established repetition has become obligatory. And historical jubilees possess such a self-evident truth which is generally accepted and therefore seldom questioned. We do not query these acts and in fact it is not necessary. A huge advantage of ritualizing our everyday behaviour is that we are not forced to think about it all the time (Gerndt 1981: 24–26).

Everyday life cannot be thought of without rituals. They express social closeness and the central ceremonies during the year such as Christmas and

Easter – to take the Christian examples – or during the life cycle such as birthdays, name days, weddings or professional anniversaries – all give everyday life its specific structure. To celebrate all these events will not be familiar for everyone. But there is one field of anniversaries where one cannot escape – it is the field of our own private anniversaries. It is worth to have a look at the history of this tradition.

Private Anniversaries

Concerning the tradition of celebrating the anniversaries of our personal birthdays, the story is even shorter than that of the jubilee. Of course one may look back at the ancient world and find the interesting fact of a commemoration of one’s own birthday in every month every time the date of the day returned.

But the tradition of our modern celebratory customs of personal birthdays dates back to the Middle Ages. The necessary requirement was to know the date of one’s own birth and this information was only extant for the nobility and the high clergy. First references for birthday celebrations of European high nobles cannot be found before the twelfth century even when considering the data revealed by medieval literature. It was not until the seventeenth century that the bourgeoisie accepted the celebration of birthdays. And rural societies did not practice birthday celebrations before the nineteenth and – as we will see – in many cases not until the twentieth century. In the countryside, church registers sometimes did not record the date of birth, and this was the case until the middle of the eighteenth century. Early modern records of testimonies are full of references that witnesses did not know either their age or their birthday. Another interesting aspect is the etymological origin of the German word “Geburts-tag” for birthday. The middle high German *geburt-tac* (old high German *giburtitago*) was only the day of birth but not the anniversary of it. It was Martin Luther who translated ‘dies natalis’ as ‘birthday’ but considerable time passed before ‘birthday’ as an anniversary became a customary expression.

Birthdays and Name Days

But why did it take so long until rural societies – and they did not stand alone – took to the custom of celebrating birthdays? Did they not have anniversaries to celebrate? Of course they did, but we have to further investigate one aspect which we have neglected so far – the distinction between the confessions. What we have to take into account is the development of different scenarios – on the one hand the Catholic name days or Saint's days, on the other hand the Protestant birthdays. Reformation and Counter-Reformation have changed the context for the developments in Catholic and Protestant countries and regions profoundly. The Council of Trent and particularly the *Catechismus Romanus* of 1566 interrupted the tradition of birthday festivities which the European high nobility had already celebrated since the Middle Ages. The Calendar of Saints became the authority for all Catholic believers, transcending individual birthdays. Exclusively the names of Saints could be used for baptising children. Protestants, with the abolition of the veneration of the saints, however, were missing the Calendar of Saints and its large inventory of names. New Christian names were created such as Gotthilf, Fürchtegott or Leberecht – names without a name day tradition but still with a reference to religion (the equivalent in the English language would be virtuous names like Faith, Hope, Chastity etc.). But in the long run, this lack of canonised names and new creations permanently supported the turn toward the individual birthday and its memory. Even though the celebration of birthdays is the older tradition, these anniversaries stand for modernity. Name days were linked to the cyclical time whereas birthdays stood for the linear time and for individualisation.

Let us have a look at these different landscapes in the first half of the twentieth century. The strict division: here Catholic name days, there Protestant birthdays had already lost its distinct border when Catholics started celebrating their birthdays toward the end of the nineteenth century. Higher social levels celebrated them earlier, as did the urban population in contrast to the rural. Around 1930 we can find the following pattern:

Only birthday – Protestant

Birthday and name day – Catholic cities, industrial/urban places and mixed confessional regions

Only name day – Catholic villages and small Catholic towns

Regions where only name days were celebrated have become very rare but even in the 1970s they had not totally disappeared (Böhm 1938; Dürig 1954; Zender 1977: 168; Hopf-Droste 1979; Bausinger 1994). And – as I can add as an inhabitant of a mostly Catholic rural region in Westphalia – up to the present the name day is the most important anniversary for devout Catholics, the occasion that calls for a formal celebration in a large circle of family and relatives. Only for the relatively informal birthday festivity, Protestant neighbours are invited, too.

There are – as another example – similar results to be found in Finland in the 1940s. The dissemination of name days which was accepted from Sweden since the eighteenth century had not yet spread throughout the whole country when it was overwhelmed by the birthday. Particularly since the 1940s the celebration of the so-called important birthdays (fiftieth, sixtieth, sixty-fifth, seventieth, seventy-fifth etc.) spread through the whole of Finland (Talve 1966: 46). Looking back to Central Europe we can add that the increase of birthday celebrations in Catholic regions started with the anniversaries. But one has to emphasize that these notable birthdays did not gain a foothold before the end of the First World War. Birthday parties for children had become popular not much earlier either. In the nineteenth century only the children of nobles and of urban-bourgeois groups have celebrated their birthdays, although not regularly (Falkenberg 1984: 16-27).

To count the years of one's life is presently an integral element of our habitual way of thinking. But it is also an aspect of the modern process of quantification. Highly important birthdays as the Nativity and the Nativity of Mary have nothing to do with counting days, months, years or centuries. They are integrated in the church year and their dates were fixed in a rather long process. In a certain sense this tradition still exists. The "Emperor's birthday"

in the Habsburg and Wilhelminian time had been the event itself and not the emperor's actual sixty-second or whichever birthday. And nowadays the Dutch "Koniginnendag" and the birthday of the English Queen are even celebrated on the "wrong" day (Hopf-Droste 1979: 236).

We know with C.P. Snow (1961: 383) that nine out of ten traditions have their origins in the second half of the nineteenth century. Looking back at the jubilee cycle, this assumption seems correct. But we can also observe notable changes in the celebratory customs in the twentieth century. And we know about the remarkable phenomenon of "invented traditions" with their astonishing careers, even when they are only regional (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2004). An example: Amongst their frolicking peers, some unmarried German bachelors are forced to sweep the stairs of the town hall or the church which was soiled with waste, paper or rice by their friends on their thirtieth birthday. A large audience of spectators is waiting for the moment of deliverance by the kiss of a virgin. The whole spectacle is crude, full of sexual allusion and fuelled with large quantities of alcohol. But in North West Germany it has become very popular in the last decades with a set of essential parts such as announcements in the newspapers with photos and clumsy rhymes, special costumes, music and specific methods to lengthen the procedure. In fact it is a humiliating reprimand (*Rügebrauch*) which has already been copied with the thirtieth birthday of unmarried women (they have to clean door handles – *Klinken putzen*) and the twenty-fifth birthday of both sexes when still unmarried. None of these customs is of old age and even in the city of Bremen which is said to be the place of origin for the sweeping of the steps in the 1950s these are customs of middle class and rural groups today (Simon 1998; Ehlert 2005).

Of course there are much more private jubilees than personal birthdays or name days. To celebrate one's wedding anniversaries seems to be an invention of the bourgeoisie as well. Particularly the celebration of silver (twenty-five) or golden (fifty) weddings were already named such in the eighteenth century but seemed to have peaked since the second

half of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century they illustrated very convincingly the bourgeois ideals of the family home, conjugal love and faithfulness. The Dutch are again ahead of the other European nations – a Dutch medallion minted for a golden wedding anniversary is already known from the 1620s and shows the images which have become popular later: the family arms and two intertwined hands (Müller 2004: 43).

Personal anniversaries are somehow awkward events for the individual concerned. Celebrating one's seventieth, eightieth birthday, one's golden confirmation or golden wedding are not only happy occasions – they are always a *memento mori* as well. This is an important difference to the jubilees of transpersonal systems as states, institutions, enterprises etc. – these gain more and more dignity and value (sometimes economic value) by age and especially by old age. Tradition sells.

Jubilees in the Professional Life

The structure of individual biographies shows significant other aspects as well. Employees are nowadays celebrated for their many years of service in enterprises small or large. At first glance, this seems to be inherited from the industrialisation and its work force. The number of gratifications, of jubilee certificates, of "Treuezeichen" (special gifts for long-standing loyalty) has increased enormously since the second half of the nineteenth century. The enterprises started at the same time with a special kind of jubilee which became the centre of special factory feasts. The production of the five hundredth or the thousandth or the three thousandth railway engine has been highly celebrated as well as the production of the five thousandth rotary printing press or the ten thousandth floodlight – all these jubilee products from Esslingen to Berlin, from Munich to Nuremberg have been accompanied by festivities with special honours for long-standing employees. Until now, these individual jubilees and gratifications are in a certain sense "voluntary employers' contribution". The aspect of loyalty marks a specific rite de passage in the factory festivities with a fixed set of ceremonies. The variety of gifts for the employees

is large and characterized by the spirit of the times but there are some indispensable “evergreens” like golden watches, medallions and a certificate from the enterprise. Colleagues were freer in their choice of gifts as the entrepreneurs were, but for decades armchairs – later TV-armchairs – have been winners (Köhle-Hezinger 1993; 2004; 2005).

But there are origins for jubilees in professional life which go much farther back in time. Priests and professors have been the first for whom we have come to know of their celebration of their fiftieth year of inauguration. Both churches celebrated these jubilees and surprisingly enough it was a Protestant superintendent for whom it was first and exceptionally early recorded, in Leipzig 1568. That does not mean at all that the Protestants have more and more given up their dissociation from the “popish” Holy Year and its fifty-years-cycle. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the “Historical Encyclopedia of Protestant Jubilant Priests” (Groß 1727–1746) was published in three large volumes. In the working world of university professors those who were able to celebrate their fifty-years-jubilee of starting their university career are said to be a very rare species. But the fifty-years-jubilee of the doctoral degree ceremony is an often solemnly celebrated festivity until today, originating from the late seventeenth century. And with the phrase of the “fifty-year old man” Immanuel Kant did not mean Kant at his fiftieth birthday but at the fiftieth anniversary of his doctorate. As far as we know, the professors of universities and of famous schools have been the forerunners for secular professional jubilees. Civil servants in large cities – i.e. Vienna and Dresden – are the next example in the late eighteenth century. From the beginning of the nineteenth century a twenty-five-year-cycle came into existence for personal professional jubilees (Müller 2004: 47–49).

Thinking and Counting in Decades and Centuries

Only one peculiar tradition of images should be mentioned here. The self-evidence of contemporary thinking and counting in decades was unknown to the Middle Ages. The change from the cyclical train

of thought to the linear one can be well followed in the pictures of the medieval wheel of life to the early modern staircase of life. The medieval idea of the wheel of life was influenced by the wheel of Fortune which pulls the men up but throws them down again. The fifteenth century still knew pictures of the wheel of life but pictures of seven or ten ages side by side became more and more popular. Since the early sixteenth century the first pictures of the staircases of ages emerged. Since then this special picture has had an extraordinary career until today and it still is a vivid sign for thinking in decades, emphasizing the importance of the transitory phase, i.e. the step into the next decade (*Lebenstreppe* 1983; Bringéus 1988).

The victory of the decimal system was a very long process. Let us have a short look at the turn of the centuries. Due to the spokespersons of the learned elite of the nineteenth century it was well known in all European countries that the turn of the century could not be celebrated before the end of 1900. Curiously enough in Germany, most of the festivities took place already at the beginning of 1900 due to the order of Emperor William II who even made a delicate slip in ordering the celebration for “1 January 1899” (Brendecke 1999: 226). Bavaria, Saxonia and Württemberg ignored this wrong call in Prussia and critical newspapers wrote about a “commanded premature birth of the century” (ibid.: 238). Due to the spokesperson of the not so learned media the twentieth century was only ninety-nine years long and very little resistance was recorded. The magic of the zeros was overpowering. But it is known for the little town Staffelstein in Franconia not to have celebrated the turn of the century before the end of 2000 – Staffelstein is the birthplace of the mathematical genius Adam Riese (Köstlin 2002: 11).

The decision for the fixed date of the turn of the century in 1900 was made very late (December 1899!) whereas the organisation of the last millennium ceremonies started more than a decade in advance – such a digit change asked for the most splendid festivities! Jubilees and anniversaries are nowadays creating huge numbers of workplaces and are considered important economic factors. With Aleida Assmann we may attribute three functions to

the anniversaries: interaction and participation, self-representation (*Wir-Inszenierungen*) and impulses for reflection (Assmann 2005: 310f; Binder 2001).

Conclusion

The victory of the decimal-classification is a victory of popular culture as well. Bringing the decimals into the world of myths is a victory of the popularity of the zeros, of the aesthetics of the clean-cut decade and thus decimals have become cult figures. The scaling of our memory and the myth of the decades as well as the staircase of ages are in a certain sense a plausible invention to reduce complexity. Since Eric Hobsbawm's "Invention of Traditions" has become a commonplace even in early morning TV-entertainment, all the revitalized symbols are said to be fakes. Here it is worth to look back a little deeper in history. It was the Renaissance "ars inveniendi" which already asked for bourgeois education and literacy to decode mythological quotations from ancient records. As we know it from baroque festivities with all their grand parades and unexpected sequences of images it was important to recognise quotations as such and to decipher the new sense behind them.

Classical scales of cyclical conception of history have divided epochs in phases of beginning, building and arrival or crisis, or have offered a morphological periodicity of birth – blooming – ripeness and death. Modern scales are working with absolute chronology, with centuries and short time units which clearly show how strong our thought is determined by these scales. "The long eighteenth century" in English history lasts from 1688 to 1820 or 1832, "the long nineteenth century" lasts from 1789 until 1914 or 1917, the twentieth century, accordingly, is a short one from 1918 to 1991 (first by Eric Hobsbawm). The Germanized ethnocentric perspective has the twentieth century ending in 1989 (Köstlin 2002).

Decades are not a natural category but rather invented and accustomed to by our habit of thinking and decimal scaling. In analogy today's celebratory customs of anniversaries have established a practice where even supermarkets and retail shops celebrate the fifth and tenth jubilee as outstanding events. The

sense of these time units must not be verified, they are completely arbitrary. Jubilees and anniversaries are omnipresent. They belong to the progress of life and play a key role in structuring time through fixed stations and marks – in private and family life, in work life such as for institutions, social groups and states. Jubilees and anniversaries are challenging – but only in the common frame of the known celebratory customs. Heads of protocol, members of advisory boards just as colleagues, friends and family members must decide to accept the traditional signs and rituals without questions, to create new ones – or to capitulate.

Notes

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- 2 All translations of originally German quotes are my own.

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