
Ideological Aspects: A Revaluation of Ritual

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Ideological aspects: a revaluation of ritual

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Ritual 'tends to be derided or discarded as the rationalization of society develops' (Dr Bernstein). Probably to most people in our own society the word suggests what goes on in church or the starchy behaviour of stuffed shirts or gleams of the picturesque and remote woven quaintly into the routine of established institutions. That is to say, it suggests the marginal or the irrelevant, or else the Catholic tradition of religious worship. However, it might be more realistic to think instead of the Chinese in the contemporary act of translating into myth the saga of the revolution:

'The long battle of the Chinese, first against their foreign enemies and then in the communist phase in three successive civil wars, has been made into a long musical epic which is now to be filmed. It is displayed in exhibits in the new museum of the revolution; it makes the background for songs and stories, the reference point for exhortations and reproach. The past is deliberately kept fresh in the public mind and it is presented with two sides. The embattled, slow triumph of the revolution, and the long prostration of China, mauled and humiliated, the masses wretched and silenced; that too is real to the Chinese.' (*The Times*, 27 April 1965). Here is the classical myth-ritual complex in current idiomatic form.

Or, at home, there is the ritualized behaviour of our own adolescents. It is focused in the cult of pop idols,* and is casually evident on the streets in mannered dress, and intensively in the throbs, leaps, and shouts of the dance halls. Altogether, it can be described as ritualized expression of the defiance, the recklessness, the sexuality of the young, and of their fears and fantasies. Not least, I suspect, it is a response to their humiliation in or estrangement from society by the system of education itself, not by the necessary filters but by an utter failure to achieve the proposed 'parity of esteem'.

Contrast with these two current examples of ritualization the flatness of most of our established rituals. Take Armistice Day. We have kept it so formally and feebly that it has been seriously suggested in the press that it might be better to forget it. Unless ritual is an act or a re-enactment which creates or revives experience or canalizes or expresses energies or responses in socially tolerable forms, it is extruded from the living processes of society and lies on the surface as a trivial formality. Two world wars, the ordeal of two generations, are not just two interludes of horror better quickly forgotten on return to normality. They cannot lapse into oblivion, as though we had no history and therefore no identity. These were the years that changed everything, the formative experience of our time, our Chinese suffering and rebirth. Does the brief ceremony at the cenotaph, the two minutes silence, the references in the churches on Remembrance Sunday, does this gesture represent a nation's consciousness of what these world wars meant and still mean? If so, it is

* For a study of the mythological hero in this context, see 'The case of James Dean' by Edgar Morin in *Evergreen Review* 2, no. 5, 1958.

a depressing thought for the future. The Chinese example, by contrast, compares with the ritualization which made Israel to this day a chosen and unique people, remembering in their lives and purposes, as in their Law, that the Lord brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Surely, the strongest example in history of the formative and binding power of ritual.

In our increasingly distractable world everything flits across the screen and is obliterated by what follows. The United Nations uses stunts to grab public attention for its business. Each year is designated for a particular purpose or for the concentration of attention upon some aspect of international affairs. The present year is International Co-operation Year, ICY with its symbol of clasped hands and its programme of events and efforts. In a way, this is a new form of ritualization called for by the need to find ways and means of bringing effectively before the attention of mankind the primary things which matter tremendously for human survival and development. Perhaps this is not the best way of doing what is needed. Perhaps the ritualistic aspect, the dramatic rally, is confused with the continuous day by day effort on a world scale which is required for realistic work on the global problems of mankind. Therefore it might be better to generalize and heighten the ritual observance and separate it from the various and necessary international campaigns to inform the public and enlist support in connexion with particular objects. A world order, the self-recognition of mankind, is something we alternately take for granted and despair of. Let it be wholly in our thoughts throughout one day of the year the world over as a national and municipal observance. What should be done during a day-long observance of this kind is of secondary importance. The all-important first step is to set apart the day with the universal authority of mankind. This in itself would be a ritual act of supreme significance. To suspend with this total blessing all but the most necessary work in order to concentrate upon the will to universal civilization would indeed be a consummation of ritual. Nor would the actual observances be a matter of difficulty or embarrassment. The occasion would be a focus for all the arts and an agenda for every active association. This should not raise extravagant fears nor hopes.

A word here about the difference between ritualization of this kind and worship as the supreme religious ritual act. Worship, in so far as it goes beyond mere submission or obeisance to power, is an identification of the worshipper with what is deemed to be wholly good and perfect. This is either something supernatural because nothing can be found in nature which is of this supreme perfection, or it is a blind projection of ideals upon some public object—as in the cult of a nation or a leader. For those who cannot project their ideals in this absolute way worship is not possible, save partially and temporarily. Nevertheless, they may be engaged in the pursuit of excellence. If they cannot worship nor idolize, they can idealize. There is always an excellence beyond present attainment, yet not unattainable.

‘A man’s reach should exceed his grasp
Or what’s a Heaven for?’

It is heaven that Browning is here justifying, not the reach beyond the grasp. The tantalizing task of ritual is to bring within touch or taste of experience ideals which transcend the actual but are not beyond hope.

Besides ideals that bind mankind and are the lure of history, there are local interests

and aspirations on which it would be well to focus an occasional but periodical act of concentrated attention designed to evoke and to renew informed resolution. The city as idealized by Lewis Mumford is a complex local ideal of this kind:

‘The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel, or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art. Mind *takes form* in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind.... With language itself, it remains man’s greatest work of art.’ (*The Culture of Cities*, Introduction.)

Very well, let it be seen as a work of art, not in an abstract statement like this, but concretely in the enlistment of the community in efforts of vision and efforts of will focused upon their city. This is not a departmental matter for the town hall but a civic enterprise which requires expression in public acts that manifest and reinforce and inform the will of the community.

The unity of mankind, the city as a symbol of the good life, these are permanent ideals on which to focus and renew human aspirations. By contrast, death is something to be avoided so far and for as long as possible. Recently it has been called ‘the great unmentionable’, now that every other habit of the body is no longer bottom secret nor even plainly private—an example of de-ritualization. Ritual may sometimes be a form of socially sanctioned pretence, but it may also help in dealing with reality directly. Behaviour in the face of death varies in different cultures from unmoved stoicism to wild manifestations of exaggerated grief. The patterns of culture produce and reproduce these forms of behaviour in the experience of death. In our own culture the ritual disposal of the corpse accentuates the end, the loss, and at the same time attempts to assuage the grief by the company and sympathy of the mourners and the words of comfort publicly declared and privately spoken. Surely it is time to look critically at this ritual. Why this concentration upon disposal of the remains? It is a wrong focus. It turns the knife in the wound. It is gratuitous, even superstitious. In so far as we no longer believe in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, the more reason for concentrating upon recalling and fixing the image of the living person whilst fresh in memory. In so far as we still hold fast to the beliefs of religious faith, there is no need to keep this focus upon the corpse. Even for the most private person, the unencumbered memorial meeting is the real tribute to the dead and the real admonition to the living, for it helps to redeem the loss in a living image and it asks for a life worth valuing. The concentration and collective contribution of the memorial meeting can raise and reinforce the image of the lost person with the sharpness of finality that survives dispersion. This should be a harvest ritual rather than a tomb ritual.

There are and must be modern rituals to help to mould and to sustain adequate social attitudes and public responses to the problems and tasks of a heavily populated and highly organized common world. Such rituals may take shape spontaneously or may be deliberately devised. A sophisticated society can modify them to make them more adaptive and more enjoyable, for without enjoyment ritual fades into a pointless routine. The screen, the exhibition, the abounding technical resources of the modern world, as well as the arts, are available for concentrated use in heightening public experience of shared values and goals. If this sounds more like the dreary propaganda mills and ‘socialist

realism' in the arts than genuine ritual, that is only a warning of what happens when we do not really enjoy the values of our allegiance and are not inspired by the ideals we profess. Without affection, attachment, aspiration there is nothing for ritual to celebrate, reinforce, expand. Society falls into the hands of fanatical organizers with coercive techniques.

There is a moral here for education. School life is heavily ritualized, and so is every phase in the normal sequence of development from infancy to maturity. But in moulding the behaviour of the young there is a tendency to excessive ritualization. *Esprit de corps* is a product of tradition and ritual, like regimental pride. Highly valued and valuable as it is, it should be contrasted with a spontaneous public spirit evoked by enjoyed activities to protect them because they are enjoyed. If what is imposed and what is evoked in the school can be assimilated in self-discipline and self-direction, the approvals and disapprovals of the school community will carry all necessary authority and yet not be beyond question or revision. Ritualization will support, not merely mould, individual behaviour in so far as the individual is party to it and is also encouraged and enabled to seek achievement in his own choices and pursuits—which may themselves be communal and ritualized.

A good example of bad ritual as a result of imposition upon the school is the daily act of worship required in the county schools. This has recently come under fire because it is commonly badly done. It is most often, and is most likely to be, an imposed routine. If it is to be a genuine act of worship, it must be more of an occasion and therefore more occasional, and it must evoke more participation. Also the impressive ritual act, deeply experienced and enjoyed, should not be limited to an act of religious worship in which the whole school community cannot fully participate, since it is not a church. Celebrations of achievement within the school or outside, ceremonial treatment of a theme, remembrance of the illustrious or the familiar dead: such ritual acts should be made an occasion, and rare enough to be wholehearted and call out the skills and service of the whole school. Serious public idealism which will inform ritual acts and be reinforced by them begins here in school or is unlikely to be learned at all.

In conclusion, it may be said that the general function of ritual in a modern society is not to mould public behaviour to a required uniformity, but to establish a secure basis of social solidarity to support tolerant recognition and appreciation of wide diversity in patterns of personal behaviour.