

KNOWING THE TIME, KNOWING OF A TIME

3RD ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE CENTER FOR MILLENNIAL STUDIES
BOSTON UNIVERSITY, DECEMBER 6-8, 1998
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Is Centenarism Replacing Millenarianism?

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Approaching the third millenium many people are wondering about the meaning of that threshold. It seems unnecessary to point this out at a conference on Millennialism, if I couldn't show, that even a part of the question is wrong. I'm not thinking about the problem, whether the millenium ends with the year 1999 or 2000. My consideration is, whether we pass into a new millenium or rather into a new century. Both are true, if we trust in the Christian calendar, which has been used since the 6th century. However if we try to look at the ways people actually did react to the stimulus of round dates, we have to consider the centuries and their transitions.

I would like to confront the tradition of *millenarianism* with the traditions of the turning centuries, for which I have chosen the somewhat artificial term *centenarianism*, as used by the Italian historian Roberto Rusconi, who once wrote about , 'millenarismo e centenarismo'.¹

So, why should we concentrate on the century, to get the meaning of the year 2000 right? First of all: We have no vivid tradition of turning millenniums, but of turning centuries. And it is undisputed that *millenarianism* does not indicate the specific reaction to the turn of the millenium but in a much broader sense any religious movement, as Norman Cohn specified, that is ,inspired by the fantasy of a salvation that is to be collective, terrestrial, imminent, total and in addition accomplished by supernatural agencies'.

So *millenarianism* can touch the symbolism of the round number, but it does by no means depend upon it. To judge the meaning of the year 2000 means to discuss at least three different assumptions.

1. The eschatological background: The time of the world was limited to 6000 years, subdivided in 6 millenniums, from which 4 were already realized by the time of Christ's incarnation and from which the last will end 2000 years after that. This idea is very old, I hope it is even too old, to be seen as anything more than just an odd fact. Some sects refer to prophecies like this. But these sects may pass the apocalyptical date like many others before: Waiting, praying and in the end praising gods generosity, for granting once more an undeserved delay.

¹ Roberto RUSCONI: Millenarismo e centenarismo: tra due fuochi. In: Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia della Università degli Studi di Perugia, Bd. XXII, N. S. VIII, 2. Studi storico-antropologici, Perugia 1984/85, S. 49-64.

2. The *fin-de-siècle*-paradigm: Mankind might be deeply impressed by the symbolism of the round number and the metaphor of the ending age. Fear, confusion and a certain *fin de siècle*-feeling may capture the public mind. This scenario is based on the assumption, that each ending of a century produces a certain *fin-de-siècle*-experience, which involves the public mind in a symbolic end. I'm going to demonstrate, that this idea of recurring *fins de siècle* is not much more than a legend. There has been only one *fin de siècle* and this was the specific *fin de siècle* of the 1890s.
3. The *jubilee*-tradition of affirmative celebrations: Which wishes and desires can connect with the symbolism of the year 2000? Could they be stronger than the tradition of fear? In other words: Isn't there a positive tradition of thinking of progress in steps, of self-congratulatory stock taking, and of perspectives into a series of American centuries, that can make the year 2000 a celebration of cultural self-affirmation? Bill Clinton may provide help, as he promised to be the bridge into the 21st century. By the way, this metaphor has already been used to describe the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. in the year 1900.

The following observations are based on the results of my recently finished Ph. D. thesis about ‚Die Wahrnehmung und Wirkung der Jahrhundertwenden. 1300-1900. (‚The “Turn of the Centuries”. Its Perception and Impact on Western Societies‘).

Let me start to sketch my first point, the eschatological meaning of the round number. The numbers ten, hundred and thousand mark the change of the decimal places. Due to the special position, decimal places have in nearly all cultures, round numbers can acquire a second meaning in addition to their arithmetical function. They already stood in classical antiquity as a symbol for plenitude, so that in particular the figures hundred and thousand became ciphers, indicating a large but uncounted number of things, persons or years. How long did the souls travel in Plato's philosophy? One thousand years. How long should they be punished for each committed injustice? Ten times a hundred years - a hundred years being the maximum lifespan of one person.^{2 3} This idea of a human period of a hundred years, of a *saeculum* which is "... partu et morte definitum ..." (bound by birth and death), as Censorinus said, formed the basis of the Etruscan idea of the *saeculum* and the *ludi saeculares*. It forged for the first time the idea of a century as a tradition of cultural celebration. Without going into more detail, I have to remind you of some aspects. Not every *saeculum* took a hundred years. The *saeculum* of Horace, for instance, consists of a 110 years. *Saeculum* also stood for ‚generation‘ or for ‚age‘. Furthermore, the significance of the *saeculum* was limited to the cultural identity of cities not of history as a whole. The *saeculum* was no means a measure of historical time in a modern sense. And at least: The *ludi saeculares* and the *saeculum* escaped from the cultural awareness along with the culture of antiquity. The word *saeculum* then just meant ‚world‘ or ‚age‘ and we cannot find it again in the meaning of ‚century‘ until about 1235, when John of Sacrobosco defined the *saeculum* again as a *spatium centum annorum*.

Whereas the *millenium* became an important concept to subdivide sacred history, the century remained meaningless in this context. This lack of function was in accordance with the fact, that

² Jochen SCHLOBACH: ZYKLENTHEORIE und Epochenmetaphorik. Studien zur bildlichen Sprache der Geschichtsreflexion in Frankreich von der Renaissance bis zur Frühaufklärung. München 1980, 140.

³ PLATON, STAAT, X, 615; similar: VERGIL, AENEIS VI, 329 and VI, 748.

there was no specific word to indicate the century, until the so called ‚Magdeburg Centuries‘, a lutheran church history of the 1560s, used the Latin word *centuria* to divide history into periods of a hundred years. But didn't anybody divide the millenium into ten parts to get a century? Already Augustine spoke about the parts of the last millennium, but he preferred, to explain eschatological terms in a symbolic rather than arithemtical way. Richard Landes showed, that the ends of some early centuries might have been of eschatological interest and therefore the church operated a policy of calendrical distraction. However, if we concentrate on the perception of the contemporaries, we cannot find exceptional signs of fear in the 90s of the early centuries. I found not a single explicit utterance of a contemporary, that his eschatological fear was due to the end of the century. This is no wonder, if we consider, that they had neither a word nor a concept of the ‚century‘ in mind, that could have shaped their perception. Moreover, it was not common to imagine time as an abstract and endless line of numbers; instead time was bound to living figures, like monarchs, popes or certain formative events. The pattern of time was therefore not in the first place numerical. Records of testimonies show, that the ordinary European man did not orientate himself on the *anno domini* years until about the 17th century.

When we consider the notion and idea of the century, the state of affairs did change in four steps during the 13th, 16th, 18th and finally at the end of the 19th century. The idea of the century appeared in the 13th century and gained more influence at its end, when Boniface VIII opened the first Holy Year, which was an indulgence to all pilgrims to Rome, to be granted every hundredth year (*annus centesimus*). The Holy Year never became a celebration of the turning century, since later popes shortened the intervening period to 50, 30 and finally 25 years.

The idea of the century first appeared in some rather remote contexts. A first trace is to be found in an anonymous tract of a German monk, *De semine scripturarum*, which divided time into 23 centuries, according to the 23 letters of the roman alphabet. These alphabetical centuries didn't concur with our modern historical centuries, since the monk started his counting with the founding of the city of Rome (: 752). Each letter or *centenarium* was supposed to lead mankind into a new spiritual state, which was why many early readers ascribed *De semine scripturarum* to Joachim of Fiore. So did Arnold of Villanova, a Catalan physician, who commented on the tract in the last years of the 13th century. Arnold replaced the letters with numbers and started counting with the incarnation of Christ. As a result, he was one of the first to perceive and indicate the turn of the century as a turn of the century. In 1300 he said, ‚that the *centenarium* begins, when the counting of the current year ends, which is counted by the church as the thousandthreehundreth.⁴ I have to point out, that neither Arnold nor his contemporaries were afraid of this special year. Apocalyptic fear at this time was on the one hand determined by traditional patterns and stories, which draw the attention to a set of providential signs, like bloody rain, celestial phenomena and so on. On the other hand, calculating apocalyptic dates, still meant combining traditional categories, like the *annus mundi* and the *millennium*. In spite of a tract like *De semine scripturarum*, which recommended the century as a key to apocalyptic reckoning, the *century* never became an important eschatological category at least in the christian culture. In 1600, a year that I've researched quite extensively, nobody mentions the tract. Its decisive notion for century, the ‚*centenarium*‘, became replaced meanwhile by a sharpened

⁴ „Quod centenarium incoabit quando finietur computatio presentis anni, quo ecclesia numerat annos Domini mille trecentos. ARNALD von Villanova: Tractatus DE TEMPORE ADVENTUS ANTICHRISTI. In: Arxiu de textos catalans antics, 7/8, Barcelona 1988-89, S. 134-169, 163.

meaning of the notion *saeculum*. The older, more technical notion *centenarium*, often explained by the subsequent genitive *annorum*, fell into disuse. It was used most frequently in computational tracts, from where it might have been lent to the eschatological tract *De semine scripturarum*. Without going more into detail, I'd like to indicate, that the computists started to divide time into centuries, long before the century became a historiographical notion.

Late medieval centuries were hardly a matter of contemporary interest, not least because of the lack of a notion, that would have indicated the century and its turn in a generally established way.

The situation did not change until the second half of the 16th century, when the historiographical notion of the century was established. The new category had a successful start. It soon captured a key position, since the habit of referring to the sequence of centuries became a common element of historical narration and mnemonic instruction. Although this practice was rather new when the 16th century ended, the protestants had a good reason, to care about the year 1600. 1600 was another Holy Year like 1525, 1550 and 1575 had been before. The flocks of Roman Catholic pilgrims represented a thorn in the flesh of the young Protestant church, as they demonstrated the persistent success of the promised indulgence. The young church took up the challenge in a rather novel way: They emphasized their own historical dignity and started to celebrate historical jubilees at their universities shortly after the Holy Year of 1575. In 1600 they reacted once more against the papal indulgence. Sermons were given and retrospects made on the century, which was later called the 'century of reformation'. In these sermons you can find a trace of pride, a touch of calculated optimism, addressed to their own identity and the Roman adversary. Furthermore we can see that the new year's sermons were presented in the form of a thanksgiving. The usual rhetoric of the aging world faded under these circumstances in favor of a distinct praise of God and his new, true and successful church.

No fear, no apocalyptic expectation surrounding the round number? With the *fin-de-siècle*-paradigm in mind, I read hundreds of eschatological mid-European tracts of that time and found only two single prophecies, pointing to the year 1600. One is of the German monk Johann Hilton, the other of the Italian preacher Serafino da Fermo. Hilton, well-known for his Luther prophecy, prophesied, the triumph of Gog and Magog over Italy and Germany in the year 1600. Serafino da Fermo read the number 1600 in Revelation chapter 14, vers 20 as a clue, pointing to the year 1600. It's quite instructive to read the comments of that time. Nobody wrote, what today seems obvious. The turn of the century is not mentioned in any of the comments as a cause of the significance of the indicated year. To explain prophecies for the year 1600 required a set of traditional arguments, which contained everything you can think of, but no mention of a century nor a reflection about its end, nothing, which might be called a *fin de siècle*.

The century became, as a category to conceptualize time, an important concept of historiography, but it resists being fit into the jigsaw of eschatological explanations. The next push of its career coincided with the growing importance of history itself in the 18th century. Whereas only a few contemporaries alluded to the year 1700 and especially to the question of, whether the *saeculum* ends with the year 1699 or 1700, the year 1800 was awaited as a meaningful step in progress itself. Hundreds of small villages, especially in the rich and militarily unoccupied parts of Germany, celebrated the turn of the century with sermons, a persistent ringing of the bells, songs,

performances and community processions. The Prussian king promulgated an edict that obliged the clergy to honor the special day with a sermon, giving thanks to the Royal family and a review of the history of their parish. The United States had comparatively few celebrations, which might be attributed to the death of George Washington on the 14th of December 1799.

It is amazing to observe the surprise of contemporaries of 1800, who tried to compare their own celebrations with 1700. A member of the Bavarian Academy of Science wrote an article on the striking phenomenon, that the end of a century and the beginning of a new had never been celebrated before. A Prussian archivist reported not without confusion to his king, that he couldn't find a single document about earlier turns of the centuries. So the New Years Day of 1801 became actually the first turn of the century, that was celebrated as a transition. The new enlightend philosophy of history often used the century, to mark the stages of human perfection. As a result every little country parson knew, that he was a citizen of the so-called ,enlightend century'. For the French it was the ,siècle des lumières', for the Germans, ,das aufgeklärte Jahrhundert'. The notion ,Zeitgeist' was used alternatively with ,Geist des Jahrhunderts' - ,spirit of the century'. For the simple reason, that the century became a symbol of historical identity, its transition attracted now attention and meaning to.

In the light of progress, the turn of the century didn't occur as an end, but as a beginning, or at least as a further step towards an enhanced future. The new temporalized strategies of selfinterpretation, sensitized society to symbols of passing time. The majority of the comments demonstrated a certain kind of self-admiration, binding the present into the flow of history and history into the perspectives of the present. Hundreds of clergy, teachers, poets and journalists evaluated their century, to fix and justify their own place in history. We can see this stock-taking as an responsibility of societies, which imagine themselves to be in continuous motion through historical time.

The years before the next turn of the century shaped the phenomenon of the *fin de siècle*. Despite its pessimism in literature and art, this was not evident at the moment of the turning century, when again thousands of cities celebrated the arrival of a new century.

The paradigm of the *fin de siècle* casts suspicion even on medieval ends of the centuries. My brief survey has shown, that the ending centuries didn't produce a chain of *fins de siècle*, but a gradual growth of the tradition of celebrating the passing of historical time in a more affirmative way. We all know about the strong tradition of apocalyptical expectation, but millenarianism is not bound to the tradition of the round numbers. Quite the contrary is true: The round numbers produced a positive tradition of the passing of time. Centennial conciousness is rooted in the sociological functions of the jubilee, which underlines the identity of one's own group linked to a calculated optimism, which bridges the past and the future.

Centenarianism has not replaced millenarianism, because centenarianism has a completely different social function. Millenarianism still rules religious hopes and fears. But as far as the cult of the round numbers is concerned, centenarianism has always ruled social behaviour, at least from the time that the turn of the century was perceived.

This might remind us, that the cultural history of the imminent year 2000, is a history of

celebrations and of positive reaffirmations. The year 2000 won't be a deadline, but a revival of the story of progress. Not an end, but another step.