



## Old and new rites of passage in contemporary Western societies: A focus on marriage and divorce ceremonies

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### **Abstract**

*This article deals with ceremonial behaviors related to changes of status in individuals' life courses, that is to say, with rites of passage. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's classic book on *Les rites de passage*, we first discuss their meaning and explore their persistence over time. In contemporary societies some rites die out, others assert themselves. We suggest that this is the case of divorce rites. With the demise of the circumstances that prevented divorce from being considered a transition event in the lives of individuals, the need has arisen to create ceremonial rites for the end of marriage. In this light, we interpret the growing interest in phenomena such as divorce ceremonies and divorce parties.*

### **Keywords**

*Celebration studies, rites of passage, marriage, divorce, divorce ceremony*

### **Life courses and transition events**

According to life course theory, the experience of individuals consists of a succession of different phases making up the life span of those individuals' biography. Since they are embedded in the social life of the community from cradle to grave, individuals' life trajectories are marked by various transition events which lead from one phase to the next. At each stage of their lives, individuals occupy a different position in the social space, from which derive different roles and expectations (Giele and Elder 1998). Life phases are, for example, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. In the course of their lives, individuals move from one phase to the next; and corresponding to each passage is a change of role. The various phases are interrelated: in fact, early events in the various

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spheres of experience (e.g. school, family, work) tend to influence the subsequent development of the life course in both the same sphere and others. For example, early school leaving induces individuals to marry at a young age, and this entails a greater likelihood of marital instability (Arosio 2013).

The different phases of the life course may have different durations. Moreover, the number of phases in the life course and their order are neither predetermined nor the same for all individuals; nor do they depend solely on individuals' physical and biological development, although they may be partly influenced by the latter. The life course, in fact, reflects to a large extent the social and cultural context in which individuals live.

However, life courses exhibit recurrent patterns which tend to vary greatly across different temporal and spatial contexts. Life courses change according to the culture and the historical period. In particular, some phases of the life course tend to lengthen or shorten (for example, in contemporary Western societies youth has lengthened with the passage of time, and so too has old age). Some phases disappear and others emerge. For example, according to the historian Philippe Ariès (1960), the idea of childhood was born in Europe among the upper classes during the seventeenth century, but it became established only in the eighteenth century. It can therefore be stated that the life course is primarily a "social construct" (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Corresponding to each life phase is a different position in the social space and the relational system of the family, the group, and the society in which individuals are embedded. The shift from one life course phase to another is a transitional event which marks the end of the previous phase and the beginning of the new one. Important transition events in the life course are birth, entry into adulthood, marriage, and death. A transition event is a moment of change, and it is associated with numerous alterations. Transitional events involve a change of status (e.g. from that of a youth to that of an adult; from the status of a worker to that of a pensioner). The transition event causes a change in what individuals can and cannot do as prescribed both formally and informally by social norms. It also changes what is required of individuals and what others expect of them. The transition also involves the social surroundings of the individual who undergoes it, so that it is not just a personal change but also a change within the network of social relations to which the individual belongs.

There are some transition events that may be normatively expected to the degree that they are considered "normal" in the person's social context. Others, however, may come unexpected, such as job loss, a sudden illness, winning a large sum of money. Both expected and unexpected events may give rise to either an improvement or a deterioration in the lives of individuals. They certainly cause a significant change, which in some cases can completely restructure the life course. For this reason, a transition event is a "crisis" in the sense that is a watershed between a "before" and an "after" (from the Greek word crisis meaning "separation") for both those undergoing the transition and the group to which they belong.

## Rites of passage and ceremonial practices

The main transition events that occur in individuals' life courses are accompanied by the ritual practices which at the beginning of the twentieth century Arnold van Gennep termed "rites of passage" (Van Gennep 1909). Rites of passage are ceremonial events consisting of a series of gestures, words, and actions that follow a precise order and are well codified and recognizable. They are repeated over time, mark the passage of time, and are publicly performed in the presence of the individual's social group. Rites of passage comprise both religious practices and social and ceremonial customs. Although the manner and intensity of their celebration may vary greatly, they can be considered universal in all cultures.

Ritual practices accompany and support transition events, and they give visibility to the status change that occurs in the lives of the individuals involved. Through codified and recognized practices, rites of passage reduce the uncertainty that accompanies change; they mark the end of the previous social condition; and they facilitate the assumption of a new identity. Because rites of passage are performed publicly, they promote social recognition of the ongoing changes. Removal of the change from the private sphere makes it evident and manifest to individuals, their families, members of the group, and the entire society. Rites of passage thus help both those undergoing the change in first person and those who live in contact with them and who are therefore affected by the change (Turner 1969). This idea of rites of passage resumes Durkheim's thesis that participation in ceremonies and rites celebrated on a regular basis strengthens social solidarity (Durkheim 1912).

Van Gennep's study suggested that although rites of passage differ greatly, they tend to have a common structure. They consist of three distinct phases which follow an orderly sequence: separation, transition, and reincorporation or, respectively, the preliminal, liminal, and postliminal stages (Van Gennep 1909). In the separation stage, the person abandons his/her previous status, and the ritual practices mark an ending. In the transition stage, the person is in an intermediate space and the rites indicate change. In the reincorporation stage, the person is inducted into the new status, so that the ritual practices mark a new beginning. Ceremonial events have several stages in which the various passages take shape. Their performance therefore marks the end, the change, and the new beginning of life phases. Each rite, or a part of it, may be of different importance at different stages.

Contrary to modern commonsensical thinking, ritual is not the prerogative of traditional societies. In contemporary society as well, there is a constant need for ritual – which, now as then, responds to inescapable needs of the individual and the group. It does so because it provides space for symbolic communication; confers meaning and legitimacy to the present by creating a bridge with the past; and strengthens the bond which ties individuals to the group. The importance of ritual in human life has been reiterated by some contemporary authors (e.g. Bell 1992; Douglas 1970; Luhrmann 1989). Rituals pervade contemporary society at every layer and sphere of social life, although they are more salient in fields such as sports and politics. As the contributions to this

thematic issue on the “Sociology of Celebration” reveal, activities ranging from family dining (Hadžibulić and Lagerspetz 2016), praying and singing (Salzbrunn 2016), drinking and working in harsh environments (Koikkalainen, Valkonen, and Huilaja 2016), dancing and having fun (Wilks and Quinn 2016) to commemorating historical events (Rusu 2016; Trako Poljak 2016) are all reservoirs of symbolic practices. Still other social activities, such as hunting, football and other sports can be conceived of as “reserves of rituals” (Segalen 1998) and seen as employing symbolic languages on which to draw in response to those needs.

One may wonder what happens to rites of passage and the celebrations connected to them in contemporary Western societies. This is a matter of debate that has split researchers in opposing camps. Some scholars argue that rites of passage have diminished in importance, especially in recent decades with economic, technological, and social progress (see e.g. Gluckman 1967). Other researchers have highlighted evidence seems to strongly support the thesis of their persistence. For instance, Fried and Fried (1980) studied the rites of passage related to birth, puberty, marriage, and death in eight societies at different levels of technological and economic development. Based on a wealth of ethnological data, analyzed in a comparative framework, the conclusion drawn by these authors have pointed out the persistence of rites of passage. Ritual practices concerning the major phases in people life course – birth, puberty, marriage, death – seem to defy political and economic change, as they resist relatively unaltered by the transformation of political regimes and economic systems.

One strand of thought emphasizes the mutability of rituals in the modern condition, as some rites of passage die out, while other consolidate (Segalen 1998). Events like birth and death tend to be celebrated less ritualistically than in the past: for example, funeral ceremonies are conducted in simple and private forms, and the outward signs of bereavement are reduced (consider mourning clothes). While some rituals diminish, new rites of passage sprout out from the modern technological environment which occasions novel experiences. An example of this sort is provided by the first trip by airplane, which assumes the status of an initiation ritual and is perceived as a transformative experience by those who embark for the first time in it (Pitt-Rivers 1986).

The same transition event can occur at different times of life and be celebrated in different manner. An example is provided by the transition to adulthood: in mediaeval Europe, this was celebrated by the ritual of the first communion. Later, the latter was replaced by the ceremony of graduation from high school and entry into the labor market. Today, different economic and cultural circumstances have hampered effective implementation of these rituals by producing prolonged dependence on the family and postponement of entry into adulthood. According to some authors, young adults today are imprisoned in a kind of prolonged liminality (see e.g. Bly 2012).

### **Inside and outside marriage: Old and new rites of passage**

Marriage is an emblematic case for the study of the ceremonial practices related to rites of passage and how they change over time. Entry into matrimony is one of the life course events accompanied by the most common, elaborate, and studied rites of passage. In traditional societies, weddings constituted and gave form to an important transition event. With the wedding, in fact, the bride and groom acquired the new status of adult and married persons which opened for them new experiences precluded in the previous stage such as cohabitation, sexuality, and parenthood. Marriage was thus accompanied by various rituals marking the exit from the family of origin and the abandonment of the previous status, followed by the entry into the new condition and the acquisition of the new roles. Ritual celebrations were assisting the spouses to deal with the moment of transformation and uncertainty. They were also designed to confer publicity to the event, by making public the change of the protagonists' social statuses. The social, economic, and cultural forces unleashed by modernity have brought about a separation of marriage and status, which were hitherto, during the times of traditional societies, so closely knitted together. The beginning of marriage has largely lost its connection with a change of status. In contemporary Western societies, the spouses may have already entered those social stages which were previously reached only through marriage, such as access to the sphere of sexuality, the beginning of reproductive activity, acquisition of independence from the family of origin. This is particularly evident in married couples who lived together before they got married, but it is increasingly so for other couples as well, due to their experiences in the period prior to the wedding. From the temporal point of view, marriage is increasingly postponed; and it sometimes comes very late in the life courses of individuals who have been adults for some time.

Despite these changes, interest in the ceremonial actions related to entry into matrimony seems to persist. When a couple decides to get married, it does not renounce practices such as a civil or religious wedding ceremony, the banquet to share with the social group, and the honeymoon. The moment of entry into matrimony is not confined to the private sphere, nor is it restricted to the spouses and their closest relatives. However, marriages now assume a meaning different from what they had in the past. The French sociologist Martine Segalen (1998) has highlighted the strong spectacular impact today linked with the celebration of marriage. Besides different forms and customs, the wedding party follows a fairly standardized script for staging a performance in which the spouses and their families are the protagonists. Consequently, although shorn of its original meaning, the celebration of marriage still persists. Not only has the meaning of the ritual changed but so too have its forms: new gestures and customs arise, while others decay. Stag and hen parties, and the habit of proposing wedding lists of gifts for the newlyweds, and more recently the paying of travel agencies to organize the honeymoon (a choice which is especially popular among couples who cohabit and already have many possessions in common). By contrast, certain moments of the ritual, such as the visit paid by relatives to the couple's home soon after the wedding, are increasingly less frequent.

Very different considerations apply to the end of a marriage, particularly when it is due to a legal separation or a divorce. There are many ways to address, and to live through, the end of a marriage. A separation or a divorce can be experienced as a trauma, a painful defeat, or an irremediable failure. Conversely, marital breakup can be considered an achievement, a liberation, an occasion for renewal and empowerment. The end of a marriage can have negative effects, especially in the period following the separation, but also positive ones. And one can certainly agree with the idea that different people, each with their own individual and social resources, cope differently with the changes (Kitson and Morgan 1990).

Of course, the end of a marriage is a complex affair which tends to have a major impact on the lives of the individuals concerned. Over time, the change will certainly lead them into a new phase of their lives, better or worse than the previous one, in which social roles and expectations will change (Amato 2000). For this reason, the end of a marriage is a turning point, a moment of change (wanted or undergone) in the individual and familial histories of the partners and those around them. In fact, the end of the marriage has a ripple effect in the divorcees' social network and kinship, affecting not only the spouses themselves but also their children (if any), their families, their friends and acquaintances, and their circles of friends and other social relations.

As far as spouses are concerned, numerous spheres of life are affected by marital instability, and the consequences can be long-lasting. Marital breakup is part of a process that extends over time and causes changes that continue to exert their effects long after the separation. The consequences are not restricted to specific but important sectors of experience such as personal finances or physical and psychological well-being; they may also concern changes in many other areas of life, including, among others, attitudes and everyday activities, identity and affectivity, cognitive maps and individual preference systems, familial and social relations, attitudes and behaviors towards religion. Despite the heterogeneity of the possible outcomes of divorce, studies suggest that on average divorced people tend to report lower psychological well-being and more health problems; and that they risk experiencing greater social isolation and more problematic life-course events (see e.g. for the United States, Bierman, Fazio and Milkie 2006; Hetherington 2003; Wood, Goesling and Avellar 2007; for Europe, Gähler 1998; Mastekaasa 1994; Kessing, Agerbo and Mortensen 2003; Burgoa, Regidor, Rodriguez and Gutierrez-Fisac 1998).

Also the children suffer the effects of a marital breakdown in both the short and long term. This is a much studied subject in the literature, in the United States and partly in Europe (among others, see Amato and Cheadle 2005; Riggio 2004; Furstenberg and Kiernan 2001; Hines 1997). Moreover, in this case, there is a degree of variability in how children react to the end of the parents' marriage. Research suggests on average the existence of negative effects of parental divorce on children, especially if the breakdown occurs when they are still young. Children of separated or divorced parents may experience difficulties at school and in relations with the peer group; they may manifest lower psychological well-being and more often engage in anti-social behavior. Even in adult life, children of divorcees tend to experience more frequent episodes of

unemployment and work-related stress. Moreover, they are at greater risk of themselves experiencing an episode of marital instability (see e.g. Amato 1996; Diekmann 2008; Wolfinger 1999, 2011).

Divorce may also alter social networks, friendships, and the bond between generations. It may have a social impact because it increases the risk of impoverishment of families; it creates more complex and sometimes intractable family ties; it undermines the schooling and entry into employment of the younger generation; and it may detract from the exchange of affective and economic aid between generations in both the short and long term (Gerstel 1988; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998; Leahy Johnson 1988; Lye 1994; Spitze et al. 1997).

### **Exit from marriage as a rite of passage**

Given the above discussion, in contemporary Western society divorce is a transition event in the life course which marks the end of the previous phase, that of marriage, and introduces the divorcees to a subsequent phase characterized by a new balance. Whatever the definitive outcome of the change process may be, the end of a marriage is a moment of change, uncertainty, confusion, and “crisis” as the term was used in the first section. The former spouses change social position and the set of roles attributed to them in the network of social relations in which they are embedded. Hence this is a change which involves the persons concerned, their families, their social group, and the society in which they live.

Although the experience of divorce has the characteristics of a transition event in the individual life course, in contemporary Western societies it has not yet been celebrated as a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1909; Grimes 2000). In other cultures of the past and present there are situations in which dissolution of the marriage is celebrated in ritual forms, even complex ones. For example, according to Jewish tradition, the divorce is configured in the form of a contract duly signed by witnesses. The writing of the document (the *get*) takes place in front of three rabbis, who have taken note of the impossibility of reconciling the couple. The divorce has always been subjected to detailed rules and ritual practices, which guarantee its validity. In contemporary Western societies, the procedures which seal the end of a marriage are few, or they tend to be very simple and non-formalized. They often consist of actions which formally ratify the end of the conjugal union before the law; and these actions are usually curt and private. Other practices relative to this event, if any, are informal ones left to individual initiative or simple local customs not institutionalized throughout the society.

In the literature, three main reasons have been adduced to explain the lack of institutionalized rituals for the dissolution of marriage via divorce, and they seem today superseded by the changes of recent years in family patterns of contemporary Western societies (see also Arosio 2011). The first reason is that a transition event requiring celebration as a rite of passage should engender a change of status. When van Gennep discussed divorce in his work, he argued that there is no change of status with the end of marriage because the former spouses remain adults and maintain their social status (van

Gennep 1909). In fact, as we saw in the third section, more recent research has shown that the end of a marriage is followed by a number of significant changes in various life spheres such as work, family, health, money, religion, personal and social relationships). It is true that the position of arrival is not fully institutionalized and is still surrounded by uncertainty, but the status acquired by the former spouses is certainly socially different from the previous one.

The second argument used to explain the lack of divorce rites recalls the idea that a transition event requires acquisition of a socially approved status. Divorce would not be celebrated as a rite of passage because it leads to a socially disapproved status. In fact, in recent decades the social acceptance of divorce has grown in Western societies. The spread of values such as individualism, hedonism, and self-fulfillment support the belief that it is legitimate to quit an emotionally ungratifying relationship (Giddens 1992; Bauman 2003). Likewise, affirmation of the ideal of romantic love has given legitimacy to divorce: it is deemed legitimate for a couple to end their marriage when they no longer love each other (Kaufmann 1993). Moreover, the judicial conception underlying the laws that regulate marital breakup has changed. It has shifted from the idea of divorce as a sanction to that of divorce as a remedy, i.e., the “no-fault divorce” (Weitzman 1980).

The third reason is that a transition event requiring celebration as a rite of passage should be part of the “normal” life course. Divorce would not be celebrated as a rite of passage because it is an unexpected and avoidable event in the life course. In fact, since the second half of the twentieth century in contemporary Western societies, there has been a large increase in rates of marital instability via legal separation and divorce, both in high-incidence countries, such as the United States and the countries of Northern and Eastern Europe, where it is frequently decided to end a marriage, and in low-incidence countries, such as those of southern Europe, where legal separations and divorces are still relatively infrequent. Various economic, cultural, and institutional factors have played a role in the spread of marital instability in Western countries since the second half of the nineteenth century (for a detailed reconstruction see e.g. Phillips 1988). In Europe, the crude divorce rate doubled between 1970 and 2010, rising from 1.0 divorces per year per 1,000 inhabitants to 2.0 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants. In some European countries the divorce rate exceeds 3 per thousand (in 2013, 3.5 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants were recorded in Latvia, and 3.4 in Lithuania and Denmark) (Eurostat 2015). What these data highlight is the growth of the number of people who have experienced legal separation and divorce in Western countries (the number is even larger if we consider, in addition to the partners, the couple’s children, relatives, and friends). The spread of divorce means that it can no longer be considered an unexpected event in the life courses of individuals, that is to say, divorce has become “normalized” in Western societies.

### **The celebration of divorce**

The demise of the circumstances which in the past precluded celebration of divorce as a rite of passage in contemporary Western societies has today fostered the growth of a need to ritualize that event. A rite of divorce, like all rites of passage, may help the

individuals experiencing the transition and those affected by the change (Grimes 1995; Imber-Black and Robinson 1998; Lyons 2007).

To envisage the possibility of celebrating divorce is not to express a positive or negative judgement on the matter; nor is it to deny the pain that may accompany the transition. It means asking if the celebration of divorce can help the couple recognize their status change, find comfort in the ritual gestures, feel less uncertain, and transit to the new status more easily. A rite of divorce could also help the other people affected by the change, such as children, friends, and relatives.

On the one hand, the divorce ritual may celebrate an ending. The divorce ceremony may foster closure and healing through reflection on the past experience in regard to both its negative and positive aspects (especially if children have been born from the union). On the other hand, the divorce ceremony may mark a new beginning. It may provide an opportunity to go forward, facilitate the change of role, and ease entry into the new status. The celebration in the presence of witnesses, friends, and family may also mean sharing the change with the social context, making the change public.

As we pointed out, there are no formalized divorce rites in contemporary Western societies. However, in recent years there have been signs of growing interest in ceremonial practices related to the end of marriage. The media used by people for entertainment and information – in particular the new social media – transmit news and images concerning the spread of ceremonial practices related to divorce. We do not know the extent to which these signals correspond to a real interest; nor is it possible at present to quantify the number of couples that have used or would be willing to use these practices. However, we know that the media partly reflect trends and changes taking place in society, and partly anticipate and disseminate them. It therefore seems of interest to monitor what the media propose and understand how they thematize the nascent divorce ceremony.

A rapid Internet search leads to the online archives of media giants like CNN, Huffington Post, ABC News, or the Daily Mail. These archives contain articles describing civil divorce ceremonies as phenomena now spreading through countries like Japan, Australia, the USA, and those of Europe (see for example Daily Mail (2015), ABC (2015)).

Available on the YouTube website are videos showing civil divorce ceremonies in Japan and the United States (see for example ABC News 2010, Celebrant Foundation & Institute 2010). On webpages dedicated to celebrations, civil celebrants propose and illustrate rituals for the closure of marriage, (Fellowship of Professional Celebrants 2016) and theologians discuss whether a religious divorce ritual would be opportune (Teig 1990; Mollidrem 1990).

The main idea of a divorce ceremony (civil or religious) that emerge from these sources is that on a given date the husband and wife meet before a celebrant, also in the presence of witnesses, relatives and friends. It may happen that only one partner is present at the ceremony, especially when there is conflict between them. On this occasion the celebrant recalls the legal ruling that has already marked the end of the marriage court. The partners reaffirm their determination to end the marriage and perform certain symbolic gestures that express this desire (for example, removing their

wedding rings and breaking them). There may be a moment when the couple's life together is summarized, giving significance to its positive and negative aspects. This ceremony is not held instead of a divorce procedure with a court ruling; rather, it is a further step which reinforces the couple's decision and makes it public.

The ceremony may be followed by a "divorce party." The former partners may arrange a divorce banquet to share with friends and family with music, flowers, and themed decorations. From a sociological point of view offering food is a convivial action with a strong symbolic value, and it can be considered part of the overall ceremony: the ritual of sharing a meal has ancient roots, and it is customary in many religious ceremonies. In the case of divorce, the banquet may become a part of the ceremony that strengthens social ties and may help make the change of the matrimonial condition public and shared.

### **Conclusions**

In this study we have discussed ceremonial social actions related to changes of status, known since the seminal book of Arnold van Gennep as rites of passage. In particular, we have sought to set the growing interest in the celebration of divorce within this conceptual framework. We have pointed out how rites of passage persist over time and are also present in contemporary societies. They may change over time: some rites tend to be celebrated in more simple and private forms, while others consolidate.

It is one of the contentions argued in this paper that divorce and the rituals emerging around this life event provides an eloquent illustration for these celebratory dynamics. In contemporary western societies there the circumstances that prevented divorce from being a transition event in the lives of individuals ceased to exist, so that the need has arisen to create ceremonial rites for symbolically marking the end of marriage. In this light, we have interpreted the growing interest in phenomena such as divorce ceremonies and parties, which acquire visibility on media able to shape public opinion, together with other initiatives such as trade fairs for the separated and divorced, service agencies for former spouses, and divorce planners.

We are aware that behind the development of these phenomena there may be market interests, which see a rapidly-growing phenomenon such as marital instability as an opportunity for expansion. For those involved, the celebrations may assume the meaning of mere consumption. We also know that in some cases the celebration of divorce may be no more than a gesture which follows the fashion of the moment and has no reference to the ritual, thus being trivial and devoid of any other meaning.

However, we have suggested that celebrations related to divorce can respond to deeper-lying needs of individuals and social groups. A rite of divorce, like all rites of passage, may help the individuals experiencing the transition and those affected by the change. The celebration of divorce can help the couple recognize their change of status, find comfort in the ritual gestures, feel less uncertain, and transit to the new status more easily. The celebration in the presence of witnesses and family may also mean sharing the change with the social context, making the transition public.

This is why we consider it important for an interest in this issue to develop in the coming years, and for it to be included in the scholarly debate on divorce and its consequences. However, further research on this nascent phenomenon is needed in order to better understand its various facets. Moreover, one of the most authoritative scholars of divorce and its consequences for adults and children, in suggesting new research directions on divorce, has invited scholars to analyze actions that reduce the stress of divorce for parents and children (Amato 2010). We believe that the study of divorce rites is part of this line of inquiry, and our study is a first attempt, albeit a partial one, in this direction.

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