

Rhythm as Ethical and Political Principle (part 1)

Monday 11 March 2019, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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As in 1896, Bücher ended his book with a chapter entitled “*Der Rhythmus als ökonomisches Entwicklungsprinzip* – Rhythm as Principle of Economic Development,” which contained most of his ethical and—if much less explicitly—political suggestions. It is of great historical and theoretical interest to us because it proposed a complete ethics of rhythm which had rapidly very tangible consequences.

Rhythm as Principle of Economic Development (Bücher - 1899)

Chapter 9, which was expanded from 17 to 26 pages, mainly reiterated the presentation of the “social evolutionary process” which had already been made in 1893. However, it introduced a new perspective. Instead of starting from the lack of regulation in the life of the primitives, Bücher this time stressed the fact that it existed originally “only one kind of human activity that merged work, play, and art together” (p. 357).

This more positive way of presenting his view is worth noticing because it reflects the ethical and political objectives of the liberal academic milieu he belonged to and certainly is one of the reasons that explain the success of this second version in a larger public. Against the classical economists who thought of the original state of nature as a repulsive Hobbesian jungle, Bücher presented it as a Rousseauist lost paradise. The utopian aim he thus suggested to the reader was to revive in modern societies the times when work, art, and play were not yet dissociated. As we will see in another volume, this motto was adopted by many young intellectuals and artists in the 1900 and played a great role in Germanic cultural life for at least the next two decades.

Unsurprisingly though, this objective was, once again, associated with a sheer Platonic conception of rhythm. In primitive societies, he argued, work, play, and art were bound together by the rhythm, that is, by “the orderly organization of [their] movements.”

The bond that holds together these elements, which in our opinion are so different, is the rhythm: the orderly organization of the movements in their temporal course [*die geordnete Gliederung der Bewegungen in ihrem zeitlichen Verlauf*]. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 358, my trans.)

Based on scientific evidence borrowed from physiology and psychology, rhythm was again presented

as a natural offspring of the human body that awakened “feeling of well-being” and “aesthetic pleasure,” and that “without distinction of civilization.” It was therefore the origin of “art,” but since it resulted in beneficially balancing pleasure and expenditure of energy, it was also the very first “economic principle” (p. 359).

The rhythm springs from the organic nature of man. All natural activity of the animal body seems to use it as a regulating factor aiming at the most sparing use of energy. The trotting horse and the laden camel move as rhythmically as the rowing sailor and the hammering blacksmith. The rhythm awakens feelings of lust and joy; it is therefore not only a means for lightening work, but also one of the springs of aesthetic pleasure, as well as that element of art to which all human beings are sensitive regardless of their [level of] civilization. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 358, my trans.)

This artistic as well as economic significance had already been recognized, Bücher claimed, by “the Ancient philosophers,” especially Plato whose insights he cited with admiration (*Laws*, 2.653). He did not elaborate though on the political authoritarian implications of Plato’s theory of rhythm (for a thorough analysis of the latter, see vol. 1, chap. 2; on the exact passage quoted by Bücher, see vol. 1, p. 55 sq.)

The ancient philosophers became already aware of this universal meaning of rhythm. Plato deduces it from the nature of man by pointing to the pleasure taken by youth in raucous motion. The rest of the living beings had no appetency for the order in the movements which is called rhythm and harmony. But its perception and the pleasure it is associated with were bestowed upon man by the gods who had a share in the dance (the Muses, Apollo, and Dionysus). Thanks to that pleasure the gods aroused in us the propensity to move and dance, and by singing and dancing, united the people with each other. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 359, my trans.)

Bücher also mentioned Aristotle whose complex contributions in the *Poetics* and the *Politics* he reduced to a three-part classification developed, according to him, in full agreement with Plato (for a more comprehending view including Aristotle’s debt toward Plato but also his significant innovations especially in his *Poetics*, see vol. 1, chap. 3; on the exact passages quoted by Bücher see vol. 1, p. 89 sq. and 103 sq.).

Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of rhythm: a rhythm of the figures (*σχηματιζόμενος*) [*Poetics*, 1447a-b] which manifests itself in the movements of the dance; a rhythm of the tones, which is expressed together with the harmony in the song; and a rhythm of the speech, the parts of which are the *metra*. To him also the rhythm is something corresponding (*κατὰ φύσιν*) [*Politics*, 8.1339b] or akin (*συγγενές*) [*Politics*, 8.1340b] to the human nature. Together with harmony, it brings about the pleasure that we feel in music. In combination with imitation and harmony, which are also innate, it led the people to the invention of poetry. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 359-360, my trans. and ref.)

“The element of formal organization in music” as well as “the rhythm of bodily movement,” he

claimed, were highly praised by the Greeks “for the education of the youth.” Here we understand another reason of the success of Bücher’s essay among participants in the *Lebensreform* movement such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Rudolf Laban. In suggesting an ethics based on “moral self-discipline” without—contrarily to Plato, who was much more consistent on that matter—never hinting at the larger political framework, it was perfectly consistent with the aspirations of what Norbert Elias called, in his famous book *The Civilizing Process* (1939), “the Germanic intellectual petty bourgeoisie.” The latter had been for decades barred from participating in the political decisions and had grown into an intelligentsia drawing its pride primarily from its culture and knowledge. It also hinted at a vague neo-pagan religiosity which was in tune with the contemporary Romantic return to nature.

The Greeks therefore attached great importance to the element of formal organization in music for the education of the youth. Rhythm and harmony should fill the human soul and permeate the whole life, because they make humans good at talking and acting. But they no less appreciated the rhythm of bodily movement, which they regarded as an expression of finer culture and moral self-discipline. Since it was the most perfect expression of the rhythm, they considered dance accompanied by music and song as a religious act. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 360-361, my trans.)

Bücher noticed, without elaborating this point, that the concept of rhythm had rapidly been used in other contexts, especially in art and handicraft, to denote the “right proportions” and the “inner order” of a work. Strangely, he made no mention of medicine nor of architecture.

The Ancients have rapidly transferred the concept of rhythm to areas originally foreign to it, such as works of art and even handicraft. In the end, to them, anything that was organized in the right proportions and agreeable by dint of its inner order was rhythmic. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 361, my trans.)

This eulogy of the Ancients provided Bücher with a basis for a critique of the modern world. By contrast with the Greeks and the Romans, modern man had no more sense of rhythm. He was “hardly disturbed by arrhythmic movements” and dancing seemed to him “an insignificant conventional amusement.” Although he still could feel its subdued echoes in “military march” or in “folk dance,” he lacked inner order and sense of harmonic proportions. A whole program was here set for the “life reformers,” even this time with a hint at politics that was remarkably premonitory of the massive use of rhythm by politicians in the 1920s and 1930s. This point will be discussed in another volume, let us recall, for the time being, that the surname that Hitler chose for himself at the dawn of his political career was *die Trommel* – the drum (see Michon, 2016, 1st ed. 2005, p. 368).

Today’s humanity must find this concept [the rhythm] quite strange. In our education the rhythm does not matter anymore. It is hardly noticed in the movements of the body and even in music it has retreated so much behind melody and harmony that even scholars give it only a secondary role. However, we still observe the influence of a new military march or a folk dance on our weary limbs, how they tend to tighten our muscles, to bring back the lost power, to cheer the mind and raise the mood. After a short time, we feel arrhythmic sounds unbearable but we are hardly

disturbed by arrhythmic movements. Dancing seems to us an insignificant conventional amusement, and a political speaker who, like that Athenian, would like to address his listeners as his “co-dancers,” would expose himself to laughter. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 362, my trans.)

Naturally, as his successor Jaques-Dalcroze, Bücher did not support authoritarian education or politics. His view was still based on the traditional German culture he wanted to defend against the “de-rhythmization” induced by the modern world. But he was not either a supporter of a revolutionary transformation that would radically change the relations of production. His brand of liberalism was closer to the *Kathedersozialismus* – lectern socialism of Gustav von Schmoller (1838-1917), Adolph Wagner (1835-1917), and Werner Sombart (1863-1941) than to the Marxist thought.

Bücher did share with his colleagues the denunciation of the deterioration of working conditions in the modern industry but he based his criticism on a peculiar perspective. Repetition, he argued, was not a problem *per se* as long as one could choose his own “tempo” and “stop working as he pleases.” On the contrary, “it free[d] the mind and [gave] room for the imagination.”

One may disagree with the modern economists, who regard every uniform work [*jede einförmige Arbeit*] as “mind-destroying” and particularly “exhausting.” The uniformity of labor [*die Einförmigkeit der Arbeit*] is of the greatest benefit for the worker as long as he can determine the speed [*das Tempo*] of his bodily movements and to stop as he pleases. For it alone allows a rhythmic and automatic organization of the work, which brings by itself satisfaction since it frees the mind and gives room to the imagination. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 366, my trans.)

In other words, Bücher still thought possible or at least advisable to maintain the traditional craftsmanship within the framework of the modern industry. Traditional ways of working were beneficial for the workers and consequently one of their aims should be to preserve the rhythmic quality of their activity against the deterioration induced by the machines.

Rhythmic work is not in itself spiritless; on the contrary, it is a highly spiritualized work. Its particularity is that the necessary psychological operations (see above p. 24) are performed at the beginning of the work and that their following repetition only facilitate, as a lubricant, the operation of the machine. The only uniform work that becomes tiresome is that which cannot be rhythmically organized. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 366, my trans.)

By contrast with his colleagues, Bücher also insisted on another point concerning this time the whole society itself. Due to the inefficiency of the primitive tools and means of transportation, in certain instances, a lot of workers had to be employed and rhythm was the means to make them work together (p. 368-372). In other words, there was a significant element of solidarity in the ancient rhythm that was to be preserved and reinserted into modern life. This collective quality completed the inner qualities previously mentioned, while it also provided, Bücher noticed, a means of training the workers.

Everywhere working convivially [*die gesellige Arbeit*] spontaneously stimulates the rhythmic organization [*zu taktmässiger Gestaltung*] of the activity; [it also stimulates the production] of songs which we must recognize as an important factor for the formation of the *working community* and also as a means of training for a better industriousness. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 369, my trans.)

Naturally, with the economic evolution, the improvement of the tools and means of transportation rendered the collective organization of work less necessary (p. 376). The new tools and devices also slowly began “to impose on the workers their rule,” without yet precluding “a rhythmic organization of the new types of work that they had generated” (p. 377). As a matter of fact, each specialized craft had its own rhythm which was recognizable in the very posture and movement of their practitioners.

This opened up new possibilities for the work rhythm. For every craft there was, so to speak, an independent work rhythm [*Arbeitstakt*], which frequently permeated the nature of those who practiced it and which was often recognizable in their entire posture and body movement. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 379, my trans.)

From the 18th century, the rhythmic world of handicraft began to decline. The modern industry generalized production methods based on division of labor, each worker making only a small part in a chain (p. 379). These new methods have “undoubtedly increased productivity” but, Bücher argued, they would not have been possible without the rhythmic training of the workers realized during the previous centuries.

It must also be said that the great technological advancements of the last century and our current “machine age” would not have been possible without the long development process of the division of labor and, just as well, without the union and the rhythmization of work at certain concentration points, such as the workshops of the professionals. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 379, my trans.)

Bücher then described the disappearance of “the old music of work” due to the substitution of rotating machines to the traditional alternate machines which still retained somewhat of the rhythm previously induced by the body movement of the workers.

Thus the old music of work, which was still distinctly recognizable in the rhythmic machines, disappears from the workshops. The rapid movement of the engines produces only weird and stunning noises, in which one can certainly hear a rhythm, but which are no longer rhythmic for our perception and therefore can only arouse discomfort. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 379, my trans.)

By contrast with his previous text, Bücher now leveled harsh criticism against the alienation of the

workers tied to the new machines which had robbed them of their long-developed bodily rhythm as well as their songs.

These new work rhythms are very different from the old ones. The worker is no longer master of his movements; the tool is no longer his servant, his reinforced limb. [On the contrary], the tool has become his master; it dictates the measure [*das Mass*] of his movements. The pace and duration [*das Tempo und die Dauer*] of his work are beyond his will; he is tied to the dead and yet so lively machinery. Therein lies the exhausting and oppressive nature of factory labor: man has become the servant of never-resting and never-tiring means of production, almost a part of the mechanism which he has sometimes to supplement. For the same reason, the work song has also disappeared. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 381, my trans.)

He also noticed that it was certainly possible to extract from the observation of work rhythms “practically important hints for the technical organization of the work process” and that this was going to be done “soon” (p. 381).

However, the denunciation of the appalling working conditions in the industry was not sufficient for Bücher to advocate a revolutionary change in the relations of production. As his other liberal colleagues, he thought that the problem of work was more a cultural than a political one. The capitalist system was reformable by improving the condition of the workers under the guidance of the state.

Thus, the last pages of the book suggested a reform program based on a critique of the separation between the arts, on the one hand, and science and technology, on the other, in work as well as in daily life. The alienation could not be reduced to waste of time and fatigue, which concerned only the body; it had also to be characterized as separation from the arts, which involved the spirit.

Art and technology now go very different ways in their professional configuration. In particular, the arts of the movement [*die Künste der Bewegung*] [dance, poetry, music P.M.] no longer have any relationship to science and practice of technology. Moreover, they scarcely play any role any longer in the life of the worker. On the other hand, the arts of immobility [*die Künste der Ruhe*] [painting, sculpture, architecture P.M.] have for a long time sought to reconnect with technology, [however] an organic combination between them is almost impossible in most areas. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 382, my trans.)

This separation between art and technology had severed work from its age-old link with poetry and music, making modern man’s life miserable. Art itself had become a sheer business while labor had been stripped of its cheerfulness and changed into “serious duty and painful renunciation.”

Because of [this separation], the life of the individual has become poorer, emptier. For him, work is no longer at the same time music and poetry. The production for the market no longer brings him personal honor and fame, as did production for his own use. It requires mass production and would not let any individual artistic inclination to express itself, even if it existed. Art itself seeks

for bread. The occupational activity is not cheerful play and enjoyment, but serious duty and often painful renunciation. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 382-383, my trans.)

Bücher acknowledged that modern industry had brought more goods and material comfort than ever but this was largely counterbalanced, he argued, by the degradation of modern man's spiritual life. His last words expressed his hope that technology and art might be one day linked together "into a higher rhythmical unity" so that "the happy cheerfulness" and "the harmonious training" which characterized "the best among the primitive peoples" be revived. In short, modern man should definitely draw inspiration from his primitive forbear; rhythm was not only the main principle of the economic development it was also its future aim.

Technique and art have reached, through differentiation and division of labor, an unimagined efficiency. Work has become more productive, our equipment with economic goods has become richer. [But] we must not give up the hope that we may one day manage to link technology and art together into a higher rhythmical unity which will return to the spirit that happy cheerfulness and to the body that harmonious training which characterize the best among the primitive peoples. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 383, my trans.)

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