http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article2484

Roland Barthes and the Idiorrhythms - Part 1

- Recherches

- Rythme et pouvoir au XXIe siècle

- Pour une éthique et une politique du rythme

-

Publication date: Friday 13 December 2019

Sommaire

- [Rhuthmos vs. Rhythm](#)
- [Idiorrhythmic Communities](#)

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) is as famous as Lefebvre and Foucault and does not need much of a biographical introduction either. Let us begin with his election in 1976 on a proposal from Foucault to the chair of *Sémiologie Littéraire* at the Collège de France. The very next year, on January 12, he remarkably initiated his teaching with a lecture course on "idiorrhythm" from the Roman Empire to the 20th century, entitled *Comment vivre ensemble ? Simulation romanesque de quelques espaces quotidiens - How to live together. Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces* (2012, trans. Kate Briggs).

In this strange lecture, which confused his literary followers but subtly echoed Lefebvre's concern with space and everyday life as much as Foucault's research on disciplinary communities, Roland Barthes began to reflect on what could be on the opposite side of the rhythmic spectrum described by both his predecessors a community in which everyone would follow his or her own rhythms, i.e. his or her "idiorrhythms," instead of being subjected to a common regulation of life that he or she could not choose nor oppose.

Rhuthmos vs. Rhythm

To explore this issue, Barthes first developed a thorough analysis of the history of monasticism. He spotted a great contrast between coenobitic communitarian monks, who were constrained by strict rules, and others, called "idiorrhythmic,"

> where each individual literally lives according to his own rhythm. The monks have their own individual cells, where (other than at particular times of celebration in the year) they take their meals and are permitted to keep any personal items they owned at the time of taking their vows. [...] In these peculiar communities, even [the liturgies] are optional, with the exception of compline. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 178, n. 23, my mod.)

However, Barthes noticed, this opposition and the term "idiorrhythmic" itself took their full meaning only if referred to a very special acceptation of the term "rhythm." He then recapitulated Benveniste's famous article on "The concept of "rhythm" in its linguistic expression" which dated back from 1951 but which had been recently republished in the collection of studies entitled *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966) - *Problems in General Linguistics* (1971, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek).

Before Plato, who initiated the current metric and musical acceptation as a succession of arithmetically organized strong and weak beats or short and long time-lengths, the word *rhuthmos* was used as a technical term by Materialist and Atomist philosophers. It meant, as *schema* or *eidos*, a "form"; but whereas the latter referred to "a fixed, fully

developed form that's set down like an object," for instance that of "a statue, an orator, or a choreographical figure," *rhuthmos* was denoting merely the "pattern of a fluid element," a form of "that which is moving, mobile, fluid," of that which has no "organic consistency," for instance "a letter, a *peplos*, a mood."

> Origins: in ancient Ionian philosophy; for the creators of atomism, Leucippus, Democritus, it was a technical term. Prior to the Attic period, *rhuthmos* never meant "rhythm," it was never applied to the regular movement of the waves. The actual meaning is rather: a distinctive form, a proportioned figure, an arrangement; very close to and yet very different from *schema*. *Schema* [=] a fixed, fully developed form that's set down like an object (statue, orator, choreographical figure). *Schema* ` form, the instant it's assumed by something moving, mobile, fluid, the form of something that lacks organic consistency. *Rhuthmos* = the pattern of a fluid element (a letter, a *peplos*, a mood), an improvised, changeable form. In atomism, one [specific] manner *[manière particulière]* in which atoms can flow; a configuration without fixity or natural necessity: a "flowing" *[un fluement]* (the musical, that is to say, modern meaning: Plato, *Philebus*). (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 7, my mod.)

Barthes did not insist on the pre-Platonic semantic spectrum of the term *rhuthmos*, which encompassed, on one end, an immobile form "the instant it's assumed by something moving," as well as, on the other end, the "manner in which atoms can flow," or a "flowing" (for a discussion of this spectrum, see Michon, 2010a, 2018a). But he clearly noticed it, even if he did not elaborate on it. If *rhuthmos* most often meant the observed *form* of something flowing *at a certain instant of time*, it also referred, in the Atomist tradition, to a *way* or a *manner* of flowing of something observed *in the course of time*.

Idiorrhythmic Communities

With these very few lines, Barthes entirely transformed the framework within which the concept of rhythm had been mostly conceived and used until then. Compared to Lefebvre's and Foucault's forms of rhythmanalysis, Barthes' could draw on a much more elaborate rhythmology. By resuming with the pre-Platonic meaning of the concept of rhythm, as Henri Meschonnic during the same years (see below), he opened an entirely new space to the ethical and political reflection and possibly to the epistemological theory as well. Benveniste's demonstration allowed him to introduce into the discussion a utopian dimension which was only presupposed but not theoretically founded by Lefebvre and which was entirely missing in Foucault.

Historically, Barthes noticed, idiorrhythmic communities have indeed always referred to the most ancient acceptation of the term rhythm. Idiorrhythmy has always denoted *a particular manner to make one's life flow* as opposed to a regulated and imposed one.

1. Since *rhuthmos* is by definition individual, idiorrhythm is almost a pleonasm: the interstices, the *fugitivity* of the code, of the manner in which the individual inserts himself into the social (or natural) code.

2. Has to do with subtle forms of way of life: moods, unstable configurations, phases of depression or elation; in short, the exact opposite of an inflexible, implacably regular cadence *[d'une cadence cassante, implacable de régularité]*. It's because rhythm acquired a repressive meaning (I refer you to the life-rhythm of a coenobite, or a phalansterian, whose activities are scheduled to the nearest quarter of an hour) that it was necessary to add the prefix *idios. Idios* ` rhythm, *idios = rhuthmos.* (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, pp. 7-8)

In short, the idiorrhythmic anchorite communities appeared as the first known ethical and political offspring of the oldest Materialist science of nature. Their main objective was "to safeguard *rhuthmos*, that is to say, a flexible, free, mobile rhythm; a transitory, fleeting form, but a form nonetheless" (p. 35), against all attempts to rhythmically frame it, or if we may say so, "metrify" it, if not "petrify" it, according to the metric Platonic paradigm.

On Mount Athos, for example, "each monk is [still nowadays] free to live at [his] own particular rhythm" (p. 33). One works if he wants but may also remain idle. There are no liturgical constraint and the monks enjoy significant tolerances for fasting and abstinence.

> [The idiorrhythmy was therefore based on] a flexible conception of constraint. No rules; merely a few "indications." [Therefore] mobility and flexibility: it's always possible to lean more towards communal living or complete solitude. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 34)

These peculiar life forms were much less known, Barthes noticed, than those of the coenobitic monasticism. They were born in the Syrian and Egyptian desert, at the time when Christianity was not yet the official religion of the Roman Empire (late 3rd-early 4th century). Their original matrix was the groups of ascetics who gathered around Anthony in the desert south of Alexandria. After having developed freely for a few decades, they were suppressed and replaced by stricter coenobitic life forms, in which individuals were again subjected to communal rhythms. This reversal occurred during the period when, between the conversion of Constantine in 313 and the Edict of Theodosius in 380, Christianity passed from the status of persecuted belief to that of State religion. All the anchorites, hermits and other madmen of God, who lived according to their own *rhuthmos*, were then considered as dangerous visionaries and submitted to the authority of a superior (first the head of the house: the *praepositus*, then a convent chief: the abbot, *Pater and Magister*), as well as to a "rule" regulating both individual and common life (Pachomius in 314, Augustin in 395, Benedict in 516).

In the West, with the exception of a few late and feebly subversive resurgences like the Beguines (13th to 16th centuries) or the Solitaries of Port-Royal (17th century), the coenobitic form of monasticism prevailed. By contrast, in the East, idiorrhythmic practices have been perpetuated until our present day, particularly by a notable part of the monks of Mount Athos (those living in the rocky desert of the southern flank), while the monks of the northern flank were gathered into monasteries. However, at the end of the Byzantine Empire (15th century) and especially from the time the Turks took over, the discipline everywhere relaxed and the *idiorrhythmy* came back in force, even in the main monasteries (17th century). Today, the monks are distributed either in coenobitic convents or idiorrhythmic clusters "both isolated from and in contact with one another within a particular type of structure" (p. 6).

These idiorrhythmic communities and their historical fate constituted for Barthes subjects that greatly concerned our ethical and political reflection at least for two reasons.

On the one hand, they constituted social groups that were entirely dedicated to strengthening the individuation of their members, that is, groups in which both the singular and the collective dimensions of individuation were produced harmoniously, reason for which Barthes termed them, with a calculated oxymoron, "collective-individualistic structures" (p. 26). The idiorrhythmic practices, he noticed, made it possible to find the right balance between life for oneself and life for the others. They created an "median zone," which Barthes praised as "utopian, Edenic, idyllic," that lay between two forms of life both deemed "excessive": complete withdrawal from society or compulsory interaction.

Again: what we're looking for is a zone that falls between two excessive forms:

- an excessively negative form: solitude, eremitism.

- an excessively assimilative form: [the *coenobium* [convent, monastery], whether secular, as the Phalanstery, or nonsecular.]

- a median, utopian, Edenic, idyllic form: idiorrhythmy.

(*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 9, my mod.)

These communities represented thus a kind of ideal from which we could consider transforming our own lives. They showed that "there's nothing contradictory about wanting to live alone and wanting to live together" (p. 4-5). In more political words, they provided sketches of a kind of "socialism" that would respect "the distance" between the individuals, or of "communities without collectivism," to borrow an expression from Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) in another attempt at outlining some principles of a politics of rhythm (see Michon, 2005/2016).

> [It's] a fantasy of a life, a regime, a lifestyle, *diaitia*, diet. Neither dual nor plural (collective). Something like solitude with regular interruptions: the paradox, the contradiction, the aporia of bringing distances together the utopia of a socialism of distance. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 6)

On the other hand, the idiorrhythmic communities showed that it was possible to organize a social group without resorting to a vertical power. This was, for example, the main issue in the conflict between the politico-religious authorities of the time and the Jewish idiorrhythmic sect of Qumran, the Essenes (2nd century BC to 1st century AD).

> Why this flight to the desert? Let's say: there were a [fundamentalist - *intégriste*] group. Opposed to the political and religious authorities in Jerusalem on the question of the calendar; the decision [taken by Jerusalem] to do away with the traditional liturgical calendar and replace it with the official Hellenistic moon-sun calendar. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, pp. 63-64, my mod.)

Similarly, in the group settled in the desert of Alexandria, there was no leader, only an elder, Anthony (p. 64, 91). The ascetics practiced a "unregulated [or, closer to the French, wild]" idiorrhythmy that was not supervised by any overhanging institution.

> That unregulated state *[Cet état sauvage]* can be precisely characterized by the absence of bureaucracy, no state power, not even an embryonic form, absolutely no reified, institutionalized, objectified *[chosifié]* relay between the individual and the microgroup. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 42, my mod.)

Also on Mount Athos, there were at the beginning of the 20th century nine idiorrhythmic monasteries (eight Greek and one Serbian) which formed a federation governed by a council (p. 31). The "idiorrhythmic constellations" (pp. 35, 51) thus escaped the control of higher powers. Their rhythmic freedom was what made them different from coenobites, whose way of life depended entirely on a rule and on the abbot to whom they had vowed obedience. Hence the head-turning equation established by Barthes: power = rhythm.

> [There is] a consubstantial relationship between power and rhythm. Before anything else, the first thing that the power imposes is a rhythm (to everything: a rhythm of life, of time, of thought, of speech). (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 35)

And its clearly Anarchist counterpart: "The demand for idiorrhythmy is always made in opposition to power" (p. 35).

Next chapter

Next chapter