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Rhythm as Key Principle of Human Evolution (part 1)

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
- Économie classique et marxiste
-



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Sommaire

- [Rhythm in the Economic Evolution \(Bücher - 1893\)](#)
- [The Natural Man and the Absence of Rhythm \(Bücher - 1893\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

At the end of the 19th century, the University of Leipzig became a kind of Mecca for the theory of rhythm. Wundt (1832-1920) had been offered a position as soon as 1875 and had opened in 1879 his laboratory of experimental psychology, the head of which he remained until his retirement in 1917. Meumann (1862-1915) accepted a position at the University of Zürich in 1895 but stayed in close connection with his alma mater. Schmarsow (1853-1936) was promoted at Leipzig in 1893 to a position in art history in which he remained until his retirement in 1919. Finally, Riemann (1849-1919) was appointed lecturer in music in 1895 and professor in 1901.

This widespread interest in rhythm, which crossed disciplines as diverse as physiology, psychology, art history, and music theory, was also shared by an economist: Karl Bücher (1847-1930). The introduction by Bücher of the concept of rhythm into economics, at the beginning of the 1890s, will give us the opportunity to engage into a survey of the spread of the notion into social science.

This extension was the last that occurred during the 19th century. It is of particular interest to us since, as we shall see, despite a strong Platonic domination, it allowed new concerns for non-metric views to emerge.

Rhythm in the Economic Evolution (Bücher - 1893)

Bücher was a statistician, an economist and the founder of "newspaper science" (*Zeitungswissenschaften*). He earned a PhD in history and epigraphy in 1870 from the University of Bonn but eventually specialized in economics and statistics. Barred in German universities because of his liberal political stand, he first taught in Tartu-Russia in 1882 and, from 1883, in Basel-Switzerland where he became acquainted with Jacob Burckhardt. In 1890, he was appointed in Karlsruhe and finally, in 1892, in Leipzig on an economics and statistics chair where he stayed until 1916.

He published his first book in 1893, *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft - The Rise of National Economy*. It was a collection of essays which rapidly met with an enormous success. A second collection was published under the same title in 1918. Altogether, the book was republished 17 times until 1930. The 1900 edition of the first collection was translated into English the next year under the misleading title *Industrial Evolution* and went through six editions in America. There is not much explicit on rhythm in it, except in a few passages that were actually added in later editions, and that usually refer to his second book. It is worth reading though, for at least three reasons.

First, it clearly presents the main methodological, philosophical, anthropological and historical assumptions which provided the larger frame for his second book. Most of the time, the latter is read by modern scholars without any mention to his previous work and therefore stripped of its deeper meaning. Assessing the real significance of Bücher's concern for rhythm is impossible without knowing about his evolutionist conception of man, history, and economy.

Rhythm as Key Principle of Human Evolution (part 1)

Second, by reading *The Rise of National Economy*, we will set a comparative basis for the study of the concept of rhythm in the Anglo-French school of economics that will be discussed in another chapter.

Third, this preliminary study will help us realize that Bücher's interest in rhythm was not a mere whim of a nostalgic character regretting the old work songs of his youth, nor a fanciful curiosity for trifles by an economist gone astray into aestheticism. It was a pivoting concept which precisely aimed at articulating the bare utilitarian Anglo-French economics with the richer anthropological and historical German economics. It was deliberately placed at the center of Bücher's scientific as well as ethical and political strategy.

Bücher actually partook in a widespread German rebellion against classical French and British economics. As the German-American economist Friedrich List (1789-1846), he blamed the latter for their metaphysical presuppositions as well as their political consequences. On the one hand, the laissez-faire principle was not grounded in the state of nature but reflected rather the latest phase of economic history. Its validity for society and economic doctrine was therefore rather limited; economic laws were historically specific and could consequently be modified. On the other hand, Bücher to a certain extent welcomed free trade, for instance as Cobden's Anti-Corn Laws League had promoted it in England (1846), but he contested the cosmopolitan order in the contemporary economical system which resulted from it. Instead, as shown by the very title of the book, he gave prominence to the national idea. Basically, he agreed with Hamilton's (1755-1804) and List's "infant industry argument": each nation had the right to develop its economy behind tariff barriers until the latter reaches the most advanced stage of development.

The Anglo-French economics, which were only describing the way modern economies were functioning in countries such as Great-Britain or France, were to be substituted with a larger evolutionist history of the stages by which each economy had developed toward its present state as a more or less integrated national economy. Accordingly, free trade was not to be rejected *per se* but the custom duties were to be lowered only as the industry in question achieved the necessary maturity to compete. The trade policies were to be appropriately synchronized to the stage of a country's development.

Adam Smith (1723-1790) and David Ricardo (1772-1823), but also their first opponents Friedrich List and Bruno Hildebrand (1812-1878), took for granted, Bücher noticed, "that as far back as history reaches, with the sole exception of the 'primitive state,' there has existed a national economy based upon exchange of goods, though at different periods the forms of production and exchange have varied" (1900, p. 86-87, trans. S. Morley Wickett). Smith posited "a natural instinct for trade"; Ricardo treated "the hunter and the fisher of primitive times as if they were two capitalist entrepreneurs. He represents them as paying wages and making profits; he discusses the rise and fall of the cost, and the price, of their products" (p. 88). Bücher argued that "historical and ethnographical" research had entirely invalidated this description (p. 88). A historically sensitive study would show that human beings had only slowly developed systems of exchange and that the national economy of the modern times was the product of a millennia-long historical development.

A thorough-going study, which will sufficiently embrace the conditions of life in the past, and not measure its phenomena by the standards of the present, must lead to this conclusion: *National economy is the product of a development extending over thousands of years, and is not older than the modern State; for long epochs before it emerged man lived und labored without any system of trade or under forms of exchange of products and services that cannot be designated national economy.* (*The Rise of National Economy*, 1900, p. 88, trans. S. Morley Wickett, Bücher's italics)

The Natural Man and the Absence of Rhythm (Bücher - 1893)

As a matter of fact, exchange was not the only criterion to be taken into account for determining what type of economy was under scrutiny. The economist, Bücher insisted against his predecessors, had also to consider production and consumption which were as important as trade for the whole economic life. Ethically and politically speaking, this meant that human societies were not based only on the loose interactions generated by the market but were also and maybe chiefly production and consumption communities. As we shall see, the rhythm was meant by Bücher as a means of working and consuming together.

From this triple viewpoint, Western and central Europe had gone successively through three developmental stages: the "independent domestic economy," the "town economy," and the "national economy" (p. 89). But before being able to describe these stages, Bücher felt necessary as it was customary in evolutionist views in the 19th century to sketch in the first chapter of his book the main outlines of the original condition of man before he entered into economic life, i.e. into production, exchange, and consumption. Since the whole theoretical construction including the significant role that the rhythm concept was soon to play in it rested on this deep prehistoric layer, we must go here into detail. As we will see, Bücher could not do better than mix the very superficial ethnographic knowledge available to him at the beginning of the 1890s and some entirely hypothetical views on Prehistory which clearly parted from sound scientific method, as Malinowski and others were to strongly underline at the beginning of the 1920s.

For Bücher, who partook in the Darwinian trend of ideas, the human beings clearly had a natural and animal origin. At one point, they had changed into humans but "for many thousands of years" primitive man "satisfied his wants" in a purely "instinctive" manner like "lower animals" (p. 3). Therefore "man [had] undoubtedly existed through immeasurable periods of time without laboring" (p. 7).

For millennia, there was no developed technology and consequently no production. Although he was skeptical about the possibility to find human beings still living in the state of nature (p. 6), he argued that, during the pre-economic stage, man was probably as "the majority of peoples of this type [those of the "lower races"]" who "know nothing whatever of pottery and the working of metals. Even of wood, bast, stone, and bone they make but limited use" (p. 7).

There was no economic consumption either. Due to the lack of technology, the method of hunting strongly resembled "the procedure of the wild beast stealing upon its prey" (p. 10) and the consumption that followed was immediate and strictly personal: "It is only when a large animal has been killed or found dead (the fondness for meat in a state of decay is widespread) that the whole group assemble, and each devours as much as he can" (p. 9).

Exactly like in the classical Hobbesian view of the state of nature that supported liberal economics, the society itself did not exist. Bücher argued that "the lowest races accessible to our observation" were not living in "organized societies" and lived in "little groups like herds of animals" (p. 7). The primitive human groups had no cohesion, no structure, no bones: "In case of a scarcity of food those loose groups easily split up, or at least individual members detach themselves from them" (p. 8). A few pages below: "Now they unite in little bands or larger herds; now they separate again, according to the richness of the pasturage or hunting-ground. But these unions do not develop into communities, nor do they lighten the existence of the individual" (p. 26). The only permanent link was the one between mother and child (p. 8).

In short, during the whole prehistoric period, the three pillars of economic life had been entirely lacking: there was no production (no labor, no technologies), no consumption, and no society that could sustain the exchange of goods. Bücher called this period "a pre-economic stage of development, that is not yet economy." And he noted: "As every child must have his name, we will call it the *stage of individual search for food*" (p. 27).

Rhythm as Key Principle of Human Evolution (part 1)

If we look now into Bücher's view of the primitive psyche which was related to this "non-economic" form of life, we see emerge the reasons that, according to him, made rhythm impossible as long as man remained in this undeveloped condition.

The primitive man, just as "the lower animal" Bücher noticed, was exclusively driven by his "instinct for preserving [his] existence" (p. 14). In general, he followed "only the prompting of the moment," his conduct was "purely impulsive, mere reflex action, so to speak" (p. 20). Furthermore, he had very limited mental capacities. His "sympathy, memory, and reasoning power" were still "entirely undeveloped" (p. 14). Primitive man was and still is "a child; he thinks not of the future, nor of the past; he forgets easily, each new impression blots out its predecessor" (p. 20).

Due to these limitations, the primitives did not engage in any purposive and continuous action nor in any permanent social relation. They lived and still live in an individual sphere closed upon itself and exclusively bound with the present moment: "In other words: *the savage thinks only of himself, and thinks only of the present. What lies beyond that is as good as closed to his mental vision.*" (p. 14)

This explained, Bücher continued, why such peoples did not care to "measure time," to "observe fixed meal-times," or to "regulate their time for work," as the "civilized man" does. In short, time was not conceived of in a metrical way.

They do not measure time at all, and accordingly do not make divisions in it. No primitive people observe fixed meal-times, according to which civilized man regulates his time for work. Even such a relatively advanced tribe as the Bedouins has no conception of time. They eat when they are hungry. (*The Rise of National Economy*, 1900, p. 19, trans. S. Morley Wickett)

This also explained why the primitive man did not care about performing his tasks "regularly or in ordered succession" and usually preferred to work only "when necessity force[d] him to it, or a feeling of exaltation [took] possession of him." Actions performed in time were not metrically regulated either .

This does not imply that he is inactive. With his wretched facilities the individual often performs on the whole as much work as the individual civilized man; but he does not perform it regularly, nor in ordered succession, but by fits and starts, when necessity forces him to it or a feeling of exaltation takes possession of him, and even then, not as a serious duty of life but rather in a playful fashion. (*The Rise of National Economy*, 1900, p. 20, trans. S. Morley Wickett)

Let us recapitulate. The undeveloped psyche of the primitive, which perfectly matched his undeveloped production, consumption, and exchange mode, thus made rhythm presented, as we can see, as "regulation," "ordered succession" utterly impossible. This conclusion is rather intriguing but it must be underlined if we are to accurately understand why Bücher's turned for his second book to "rhythm and work." Rhythm was what actually transmuted the prehistoric beasts into humans; rhythm was the anthropological as well as the economic key principle.

[Next chapter](#)