

Rhythm as Form of Social Process (Part 3)

Tuesday 12 March 2019, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Rhythm as Principle of Total Anthropology (Mauss - 1904-1923)

This transformation, or rather this unnoticed shift in the notion of rhythm, sheds some light on the Maussian program, developed after WW1, of a “total anthropology” embodied in the concept of “total social fact.” It also allows us to clearly distinguish it from its subsequent interpretations, particularly from that of Levi-Strauss but also from those developed more recently, still without any mention of the rhythm, by Maurice Godelier, Vincent Descombes, or Alain Caillé. [1]

I will develop this argument in another volume, but for the time being, let us notice that as early as 1904, Mauss and Hubert noted the link between the magic incantation and the body.

Far from being a simple individual expression, magic constantly constrains gestures and phrases. Everything is fixed and exactly determined. It imposes meters and chants. Magic formulas must be whispered or sung in a special tone, on a special rhythm. (*Outlines of a General Theory of Magic*, 1904, p. 51, my trans.)

In 1909, Mauss emphasized the “musical, rhythmic and melodic character of any archaic ritual formula” (*The Prayer*, 1909, p. 463). But as for Bücher, the song was “strongly linked to the manual rhythm to which it [was] subjected, since it [had] no other function than to rhythmize it and to direct it” (p. 463). Song and bodily movements could easily continue into each other.

[The song] can go on like a stereotypical gesture when the actor is tired and stops dancing [...]. The beat [*la mesure*] one keeps giving [*battre*] with music sticks (*tnuma*) is certainly a ritual gesture. (*The Prayer*, 1909, *Œuvres*, to. I, p. 463, my trans.)

Similarly, Mauss concluded his analysis of the ritual formulas by emphasizing the link between ritual formula and bodily movements through the rhythm.

All the formulas we will meet henceforth are: I. CONCERNING THE RITUAL FORMULA: 1° *Musical*, that is, *melodic and rhythmic*; 2° *Regulator* [Directrice] of gestures, mimes or dances. (*The Prayer*, 1909, *Œuvres*, to. I, p. 466, my trans., Mauss' emphasis)

In the course of 1922-23, devoted to the “Austalian oral ritual, and particularly, the artistic ritual,” Mauss extended this relationship even further.

A thorough study of the Australian ‘corrobori’ (musical drama) has shown the public character of all its parts; research on the nature of rhythms, on the use of altered or worn words, on the relation between music, words and mimed gestures, or simply dance, has shown not only the social character, but the uniform effect on the organisms of the actors acting in group, and of the listeners participating in the singing. (“Cours de 1922-23,” *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 261, my trans.)

To these lower levels of the complex set of signifiers which partook in the rhythm, we must add other extralinguistic extensions which were this time concerning the social group. As soon as 1903, reflecting on the origins of poetry, Mauss defined the latter as a community “animated by the rhythmic movements” of ritual singing and dance.

The primitive choir presupposes, not only a group of people, but also a group of people who concentrate their voices as well as their movements, which form a same dancing mass (*throng* [in English]). The community animated by rhythmic movements is the immediate, necessary and sufficient condition of the rhythmic expression of the feelings of this community. (“Les débuts de la poésie selon Gummere,” 1903, *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 252, my trans.)

In 1904, the study on magic came to the same conclusion. The magic rhythm was not limited to verbal and musical individual incantations, but mobilized all bodies in the group and put them together in movement.

At the Dayaks [...] when men are on the hunt, women wear swords [...] the whole village (...) must get up early because in the distance the warrior gets up early [...]. The whole social body is animated by the same movement. There are no more individuals. They are, so to speak, the spokes of a wheel, the ideal image of which would be the dancing and singing magic ring. (*Outlines of a General Theory of Magic*, 1904, p. 126, my trans.)

In 1909, in the study on prayer, the rhythm of individual prayer expanded to its social context. The ritual song “serve[d] to accompany the dance of an actor or a small number of mimes.” (1909, p. 463) Prayers were “collectively sung” (p. 466).

In 1921, Mauss stated again the same idea. Rhythm was “not simple [individual] words and acts” but a “collective element.”

From another point of view, moreover, the unity of manual ritual and oral ritual is still apparent: formulas and gestures are rhythmized, measured [*rythmés, cadencés*]. These are not simple words and acts, they are poems and songs and mimes. In the latter as in the former, there is the same collective element: rhythm, unison, repetition. (“Catégories collectives de pensée et liberté,”

In both cases, whether that involving the continuity between rhythm and body, or that concerning the connection between rhythm and social group, Mauss addressed phenomena that had already been debated extensively by Bücher. But the difference between them may now appear to the reader. Whereas Bücher had taken rhythm as sheer set of sounds, that is from an *acoustic and musical* perspective, and described its flow through a *metric* model, Mauss approached rhythm from an *anthropological*, as well as *poetic, and linguistic* perspective, which opened the possibility to consider its flow through a *rhuthmic* model. In human societies, rhythm could not be merely reduced to an *ordered sequence of sounds*; it had to be considered, even in its mere physical or social sides, as partaking in the language activity, and was therefore observable as an *organized flow of signifiers*. Naturally, this meant enlarging the notion of language which encompassed not only tongue and speech, as philosophers and linguists had sustained for centuries, but also breath, gesture, and bodily movements; chant, song, and poetry; and social interactions.

By drawing a continuity between bodies, language, and society, this large *rhuthmic* signifying system participated in the production-reproduction of the human groups formed by these bodies, as well as the production-reproduction of the individuals themselves. Since he concentrated on ethnographical data, Mauss found this role powerfully embodied in the poetry of the primitive groups but he noted—in a prefiguration of Meschonnic's concept of "poetic subject" (see Bourassa, 2015, p. 53 *sq.*)—that, in modern societies, the rhythm had inherited this onto- and sociogenetic character through the transmission of the experience made in ritual collective singing to our poetic activity.

The rhythm still fulfills, for the individual poet who writes in order to be read, a function analogous to the one it once fulfilled, in the primitive homogeneous mass in which everyone was at once a poet and a listener. It is still a rule, a social thing; it is *the very condition of that sympathy* which poetry creates in a group of men. ("Les débuts de la poésie selon Gummere," 1903, in *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 255, my trans., my emphasis)

Many years later, in a theoretical text about the organization of sociology, Mauss commented on the role of language rhythm in modern societies. The politician, he explained in a sudden but illuminating aside, must also demonstrate "his ability to handle the formulas, to 'find the rhythms' and the necessary harmonies" ("Divisions et proportions des divisions de la sociologie," 1927, *Œuvres*, to. III, p. 235). Thus modern political action was suddenly put in line with that of poetry and ritual song in archaic societies. If it wanted to succeed, it had to create rhythms that were in phase with the social rhythms. Mauss did not elaborate further on this particular subject—yet we will see that he proposed during the inter-war period a full rhythmic theory of society and power—but there is a letter written at the end of the 1930s to Roger Caillois (1913-1978), one of his young students who was fascinated by this idea, that proves that he was strongly suspicious about the rhythmic politics that had already developed in Russia, Italy, and Germany and was then envisaged, in France, by some members of the Collège de Sociologie (1937-1939). [2]

During the 1900s and 1910s, Mauss introduced several decisive innovations which significantly estranged him from his predecessors.

1. As Malinowski, he rapidly recognized the need for anthropologists to elaborate monographic studies that would consider all aspects of a single society, instead of reconstructing grand evolutionist or historicist views out of disparate data severed from their social context. In 1906, the publication of the *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo* thus offered the first complete monographic and descriptive study of the effects produced by rhythmic morphological changes on individual and collective production-reproduction.

2. Mauss broke with Durkheim's sociological neo-Kantianism which aimed primarily at showing that categories of perception (space, time) or thought (whole, genus, cause, substance, soul, person) were not innate, as Kant had believed, but from social origin. This resulted in the rejection of the synthesis presented by Durkheim in the conclusion of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which granted the morphological rhythm a certain sociogenetic power but aimed above all at accounting for the social construction of the category of time, through which the group coordinated its actions and the individuals organized their intimate "duration."

3. Mauss also discarded the crowd-psychology vocabulary borrowed from Le Bon, which was still used although in a covert manner by Durkheim, and elaborated instead the concept of "variation of social life." Society no longer appeared as a great pot where the social broth periodically returned to boiling and the individual were regenerated, but as a set of entities varying according to different rhythms, in short as a *system of intertwined undulating functions*. By doing so, Mauss laid one important foundation of the "physiology" of society that he was to develop after WW1 to account for society's permanent historical dynamism.

4. Yet, Mauss strongly objected to the reduction of society, at the hands of neoclassical economists, to a living organism and more generally to their comparison of economy with nature. The social "functions" he had identified were therefore of an entirely different nature from those postulated by economists. However, one cannot help noticing that despite this sharp ontological difference, there was no divergence in their formal description. In both cases, their dynamism was thought out according to the same neo-metric standard as fluctuation. This limitation made Mauss' last two innovations before WW1 all the more remarkable.

5. In the essays on *Magic* (1904) and *Prayer* (1909), as well as in the extensive research work that supported them, Mauss parted from the latest undulatory perspective, which from natural science had penetrated during the last decades into a large number of human and social sciences—and of which he had himself made considerable use. However, instead of using to accomplish this new step, as in the German tradition, the model of music, Mauss drew from his solid philological knowledge, from his meticulous attention to ethnographical data, and maybe from his personal interest in the latest developments in art and poetry, the outlines of a new notion of rhythm that could now be defined as *system of signifiers, whatever their linguistic or extra-linguistic level, responsible for the pragmatic and semantic effects of the discourse*.

6. In so doing, Mauss introduced into social science, for the first time ever, poetic and linguistic concerns that were close to those expressed by a series of poets, philosophers and linguists since the

middle of the 18th century (see vol. 2). It also largely anticipated the discoveries concerning the pragmatic and poetic functions of language, that were made in the second half of the 20th century by authors such as Benveniste, Austin, Jakobson, and Meschonnic. Although he still partook, by promoting the concept of “oscillating function,” in the dominant epistemological trend borrowing from natural science, Mauss already indicated an alternative perspective which opened onto a radically historical anthropology. He also firmly opposed any recourse to the *Platonic metric model* and substituted it with a clear affirmation of the urgent need to utilize concepts pertaining to what we have recognized as the *Democritean physical* and the *Aristotelian poetic paradigm*.

Apart from Marcel Granet whose work I will discuss in another volume, most Durkheimians unfortunately did not follow Mauss on this path and continued in the wake of Durkheim’s original neo-Kantian research program on the category of time. In their works, the rhythm was defined as the more or less rapid movement of people and material objects within a group as well as in its relations with external groups—viz. as *tempo*. Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) showed, for instance, that there are “as many collective times as separate groups” and that the depth of the “collective memory” varies according to these “rhythms” (1997, 1st ed. 1950, p. 148, my trans.). Georges Gurvitch (1894-1965), explicitly referring to Halbwachs, emphasized that some groups have a “slow pace [*cadences lentes*],” while others have a “medium or accelerated pace [*cadences moyennes ou précipitées*]” and that it explained the diversity of their “experiences of time [*temps vécu*]” (1950, vol. 1, p. 317, my trans.). Leroi-Gourhan, who culminated this tradition, affirmed that “rhythms are creators of space and time, at least for the individual; space and time are experienced [*vécus*] only to the extent that they are materialized in a rhythmic envelope” (1965, p. 135, my trans.). In all these cases, the rhythm, identified to its metric definition as *succession of accents*, constituted the framework of social activity and formed a set of markers making it possible to give consistency to the individual time that would be otherwise entirely devoid of form. Rhythm was a means both of coordinating social interactions and organizing psychic duration but it had lost its onto- and sociogenetic power.

This trend of thought, with its metric substratum and its tendency to reduce rhythm to *tempo* or *pace*, has been revived during the last three decades in numerous studies about “space shrinking” or “time acceleration” (Harvey, 1989; Virilio, 1995; Baier, 2000; Rosa, 2010), the ambiguity of which is not unlike that of their predecessors—whom they actually usually ignore. Although such studies provide interesting insights, they usually miss, due to their lack of knowledge concerning anthropology, poetics and linguistics, a great deal of the current transformations. By contrast, it would certainly be most useful to resume with the *rhuthmic question* as Mauss has begun to reformulate it and with the *radically historical anthropology* it motivated.

[Next chapter](#)

Footnotes

[1] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. “Introduction à l’œuvre de Mauss” in Mauss, Marcel. 1950. *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, P.U.F., p. I-LII. – Godelier, Maurice. 1996. *L’Énigme du don*, Paris, Fayard. – V. Descombes, 1996. *Les Institutions du sens*, Paris, Minuit. – Caillé, Alain. 2000. *Anthropologie du don. Le tiers paradigme*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer.

[2] Mauss’ letter to Caillois was dated June 22, 1938. It is accessible at:
<http://www.rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article101>