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Edgar Morin and the Rhuthmoi of Machines - Part 2

- Recherches
- Rythme et pouvoir au XXIe siècle
- Pour une éthique et une politique du rythme



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Ethics and Politics of *Homeorrhesis* - Steady Flow

This *rhuthmic* theory of self resulted in an ethics and a politics that were quite different from those advocated, on the one hand, by Heideggerian and deconstructionist philosophers but also, on the other hand, by Wienerian and technique thinkers. In Morin's opinion, human brains and human societies were just complex machines among others. But he rejected the simplistic comparison with homeostatic and well regulated organizations. He noticed that historical societies but he could have added human individuals were "commanded by Apparatuses which enslave[d] in every sense of the term, producing enormous works, imbued with unbridledness and violence, vowed to inter-destruction" (p. 220). Emphasizing the hubris of the latest industrial societies, he warned that what appeared as "regulation" by industrial growth actually "ruined" our "civilizations and cultures" and degraded and threatened with death "living eco-systems" and "by retroaction, humanity itself."

Our sociaugurs had believed that we had finally arrived, in the middle of the twentieth century, at the grand regulation of industrial Society. In fact, we were, we are in the era of exponential and surexponential demographic, technical, economic megagrowths. Worse: what appeared to us to be the grand regulator, industrial growth (and which was, partially and for a time), ruined and continues to ruin civilizations and culture, triggering profound crises in the cultural tuff of our society and our existence, sacrificing and subordinating all other developments to the sole technoeconomical, degrading living eco-systems and threatening them with death, and, by retroaction, humanity itself... (*Method*, vol. 1, 1977, trans. J.-L. Roland Bélanger, 1992, p. 220)

However, Morin believed, modern individuals as well as societies were not doomed to failure. As for any other open machines, degradation and disorganization were indeed feeding positive retroaction and reorganization. "Positive retroaction awaken[ed] the genestic forces asleep in the humdrum of regulation" (p. 222).

This led him to an extraordinary suggestion: while the 20th century societies had believed hitherto in sheer "homeostasis" based on negative retroaction and regulation, they should now envisaged a "homeorrhetic vision of modern societies," an ethical and political quality he specified as "becoming simultaneously open, creative, and self-regulating."

Even the naive and terrifying folly of believing that industrial growth is in essence regulatory and ordering carried in itself, mutilated and falsified, a great idea which remains to be developed, that of a becoming simultaneously open, creative, and self-regulating. We would have to dream today no longer of a homeostatic but of a homeorrhetic vision of modern societies. (*Method*, vol. 1, 1977, trans. J.-L. Roland Bélanger, 1992, p. 221)

The emergence in Morin's reflection of the biological term "*homeorrhesis*," lit. steady flow, forged by Conrad Hal Waddington (1905-1945) in the 1940s to characterize a dynamical system that returns to its trajectory, as opposed to a system that merely returns to a particular state (*homeostasis*), and its association with the ideas of "openness," "creativity" and "self-regulation," was reminiscent of Barthes' *idiorrhhythmy*.

First, although it referred in both cases to a system observed over time, the distinction between *homeostasis* and *homeorrhesis* appeared close to the pre-Platonic distinction between *rhuthmos* as "form in the instant of observation" and as "way of flowing." Second, as we remember, Barthes tried to build an ethics and even a politics based on the personal choice of one's way of living, literally of a proper manner to make one's life flow within a community. So, while Barthes' ideal could be described as a community allowing a return to one's steady flow, Morin's ideal could reversely be described as a society performing idiorrhhythmic regulation upon itself. Truly, Barthes's perspective was more focused on the individual, while Morin's was more oriented towards society, yet in both cases, ethics and politics were thought of as based on the quality of the life flow.

By contrast, Morin was at odds with Lefebvre who, we remember, simplistically opposed cyclical-natural to linear-mechanical rhythms of life. Not only there was, in Morin's opinion, no fundamental opposition between natural and human/historical machines, but the so-called "linear rhythms" were not different from "cyclical rhythms." They both belonged to the sphere of repetition. Instead, what was ethically and politically significant was the contrast between poietic/genetic and repetitive processes.

In a certain way, therefore, chaos remains present, transformed and transforming in the loop. [...] And the processes of genesis are pursued, but transformed into *poiesis* and production in and by these machine-organizations. Genesis falls asleep, loses all *poiesis* when the generative becomes purely repetitive, when regulations are only control and elimination of deviances, when production is only fabricative. (*Method*, vol. 1, 1977, trans. J.-L. Roland Bélangier, 1992, p. 224)

"En-cyclo-peding" Knowledge as *Rhuthmic* Thinking Practice

At the end of the second part of his book, Morin summarized the first results of his survey on 20th century physical, biological and social science. He found that a new articulation between "the domains of physics, biology, anthro-po-sociology," which were hitherto "non-communicating," had emerged. Thanks to the "generic concept of machine-being," on the one hand, and to the common "communicational organization" of "physical beings, biological organizations, and anthro-social organizations," on the other, "the three empires of physics, biology, anthro-po-sociology" had been, he claimed, satisfactorily "articulated" (p. 273). Resuming with the oldest materialist doctrines, Morin argued that living beings as well as human societies were *genetically* derived, even in a distant way, from the physical, but he added that this evolutionary dependency was, at the same time, *conceptually* counterbalanced by a reverse inclusion of the physical in the biological and of the biological in the anthro-po-sociological.

We are talking indeed, *but not solely*, of founding the biological on the physical and the anthropo-sociological on the biological. [...] We are talking also, *but not solely*, of conceiving physical organization inside biological organization, and biological organization inside anthropo-sociological organization. [...] We are talking also, *but not solely*, of conceiving the physical concepts of machine, production, work, etc., as concepts emanating from our own culture and based not only on observations of "nature," but also on the organization of our mentality, which returns us not only to the organization of human understanding, but also to the sociology of knowledge. (*Method*, vol. 1, 1977, trans. J.-L. Roland Bélanger, 1992, p. 274)

Morin noticed that the concepts of "work" and "energy," for instance, had migrated in the 19th century from social praxis to classical physics or, more recently, the terms "communication," "information," "code," "program," "message," "finality" from anthropo-social experience to cybernetics, then from there to biological organization, before returning under their new cyberneticized form into anthropo-social organization (p. 275). Such loops had always existed but it was now a matter of replacing those "clandestine circulation by deliberate circulation" in order to overcome both the noxious "disciplinary fragmentation," and the superficial "transdisciplinary systemisms or cyberneticisms" which did not pose "the problems of their own foundation" (p. 276).

In order to avoid both "*naivetes and blindnesses which conjointly reign today, the one of reductionist physicomorphism and the other of reductionist anthropo-sociomorphism*" (p. 276), or, in terms that were reminiscent of Foucault's critique of the concept of "Man," the "atomizing ideology" and the "mythology of man [as] sole being, sole existent, sole organizer, sole animator, sole creator" (p. 280), in other words, in order to oppose simultaneously sheer materialism and sheer culturalism, which were the two faces of the same coin, Morin thus envisaged thinking and knowing as activities that never rested and never stopped at any point. Thinking and knowing entailed constant circulation and looping between the three main domains: physics, biology, and socio-anthropology. This *method* was what he called "en-cyclo-peding" knowledge and for what he is still famous today. Elaborating further what he had said before, he concluded that if there was a "meta-systemic point of view," it was not hanging over the three main domains on a mysterious exterior position but was located in the circulation itself between those domains: "*The meta-system can only be a retroactive/recursive loop*" (p. 277).

This was not the first time that thinking and knowing were recognized as essentially flowing and that the scientific quality of a thought was explicitly related with its way of flowing, i.e. with its being *rhuthmic*. This had been, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the main concern for a few philosophers such as Spinoza, Leibniz, and Diderot (see Michon, 2015a, 2018b). This was also, yet in different ways, a central issue, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century for Bergson and Whitehead.

Naturally, Morin's attempt benefited from the latest scientific progress in the second half of the 20th century and was therefore based on new concepts such as "generative principle," "circulation" and "loop." Yet, compared to some of his predecessors', as we will see, Morin's reflection was certainly lacking reference to a crucial issue: language. Without ignoring it, his characterization of the three main ontological domains: *physis*, *bios*, and *anthropos*, was short-circuiting the language that was wrongly presented as merely internal to society. At the top of the pyramid of "organizing systems," "machines" and "selves" that composed the universe, one was surprisingly missing. The one that precisely allowed to merely think and develop a six-volume long reflection.

* Read with Serres' contribution in mind, the first part of *Method* appeared as a meticulous re-actualization of the Ancient physical *rhuthmic* paradigm based on the latest scientific knowledge. Except in a few cases, it covered exactly the same subjects and suggested very comparable kinds of views.

By contrast, the second part introduced new concerns about "active organizations," "machines," "self," and outlined the contours of a new ethics and politics, as well as a new theory of knowledge. However, most of these concepts were obvious re-elaborations of the theories already presented in the first part and shared the same *rhuthmic* basis. "Active organizations" and "machines" depended on the intertwining of internal and environmental loops that resulted in a "flowing self." And the ethical and political sketches as well as the brief theory of knowledge prolonging these concepts were based respectively on *homeorrhesis*, that is, allowing the self to reach a "steady flow," and on "en-cyclo-peding" knowledge, that is, making it properly flow through recursive loops.

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