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# Power in the light of the Theory of rhythm : a view from the 21st Century

- Recherches

- Rythme et pouvoir au XXIe siècle

Comment penser le pouvoir dans le monde contemporain ?

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**Summary :** "There is an inextricable link between power and rhythm. What power imposes in the first place is a rhythm (rhythm of everything - life, time, thought, discourse)" Roland Barthes wrote. In light of "the rhythmic organization of the process of individuation" proposed by Pascal Michon power appears as a "rhythmic medium".

**Keywords :** theory of rhythm, rhythmic organization of the process of individuation, historical anthropology of the subject, power as "rhythmic medium".



The French historian and philosopher Pascal Michon, whose works are the primary source of this text, argues that in the new globalized world transformations of reality leave behind the creation of the theoretical instruments to analyze it. In the conditions of total commercialization of human relations 'de-systematization', 'de-governmentalisation', 'de-desciplining' are present in all spheres of life. It is not always possible to grasp it all using traditional explanatory schemes and familiar concepts of 'system', 'structure', 'individual', and 'interaction'. The radical criticism of the world order of thirty or forty years ago is definitely losing its liberating force, turning into a prop of neo-liberalism. This also concerns all existing concepts of power, including relational ones, in many ways directed against traditional dualism, which keeps its position both in philosophy and social science today. What makes the situation more complicated is that redundant/excessive and accessible information has generated/bred the so-called 'academic phagocytosis/englobement' which is superficial digestion of critical thought solely as the ground/motive to achieve academic degrees and endless commentaries. Besides, we are witnessing a catastrophic turn in the direction of disciplinary knowledge. Interdisciplinarity in all its forms often remains nothing but a slogan. In social sciences, including history, according to Michon, 'academism is raging' where the highest value belongs to empiricism and positivism. All this makes the objective of renovating conceptual thinking a pragmatic need. To begin with, according to Michon, we need radical historization of intellectual heritage, including structuralist and post-structuralist critical thought. The idea is to take this thought back into the context where it was created in order to find new approaches to 'the liquid modernity' and historical material.

One of the directions within this search has to do with reconsidering the concept of 'rhythm' and applying the rhythmic theory developed in anthropology, sociology and linguistics to historical anthropology and political science. As far back as in the beginning of the previous century Marcel Mauss formulated the following thesis : 'Man is a rhythmic animal'. Studies of the topic of rhythm which started in late twentieth Century at the intersection of philosophy, social sciences and poetics have shown that it contained a great heuristic potential. It was made clear that in the course of the whole twentieth Century, on and off, rhythm was the subject of close attention not only in natural sciences and philosophy but also in sociology, anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, film studies, literary science and history.

Interpreting the results made it possible to reconstruct the genealogy of the concept of 'rhythm' in the spirit of radical historicism/historicism and offer its different content. Instead of the widely spread understanding of rhythm as tempo Pascal Michon suggests going back to the pre-Plato concept of *rhuthmos* (literally 'rhyme') which, as was shown by Émile Benveniste, in the Ancient Greece meant 'the form of the moving'. Rhythm in this interpretation allows us to

imagine and describe what used to seem invisible - not as much the individual-to-individual or system-to-individuals interactions as 'the manner of flow' (*manière de fluer*), the general organization of these interactions. As a result, in the foreground we have the process of 'creating' individuals and revealing/disclosing the temporal and spatial organization of this process. Thus the concept of 'individuation' acquires new content.

As a rule, individuation is understood as formation of a single individual who belongs to himself and is different from others. This concept is the basis of ethics and politics of liberal individualism and individualistic methodology which, in Michon's view, has exhausted itself in many ways. The model of possessive individual (individe-possessive) is believed to have been formed in the 17-18th Centuries. However during the Age of Enlightenment there also existed an alternative, less salient, model. In the framework of this model the individual is interpreted through terms of 'manner', his way of life. This model was developed in artistic circles in the practice of production and exchange of the artistic, not economic type. This model is known to have been used by Denis Diderot in analyzing artistic practices. It allows to critically reconsider the process of individuation. Unlike the 'possessive individual' (notion introduced by Hobbes and Locke), the 'manner-individual' cannot be reduced to himself, he exists only in the interaction with the public. Amongst the innumerable 'ways/manners of flowing' (*les manières de fluer*) one could call 'good' those rhythms which make it possible for single and collective individuals to find the best manner of change for themselves. Ideally this could be done by a creative individual, an artist, because individuation rhythms of an artist do not necessarily imply a state of fighting, or war, or such. One great master does not exclude another ; they coexist.

According to Michon, individuation process (that of both single and collective individuation) includes at least three aspects : 'corporality/bodiness', i.e. techniques organizing the 'flow of bodies' (Michon introduces a new term of 'flow' - *le fluement*) ; 'discursiveness', i.e. techniques organizing linguistic activity (*langage*), which nowadays is normally called 'discourse' ; and 'sociality', i.e. techniques determining forms of intensity of interaction of bodiness-linguistic ?@0:B8:. Michon calls this 'rhythmic organization of the individuation process'. It is important that all three aspects of individuation are inseparably interconnected. Only as a result of the intertwining of corporality/bodiness, discursiveness and sociality are 'souls' formed/composed/constituted. 'Individuation rhythm' is presented by Michon as a universal characteristic of an individual. In each historical period, in each group under consideration such techniques make up a complicated '*dispositif*' ('device', 'machinery', 'apparatus', 'construction', and 'deployment' ) - rhythm of rhythms. It turns out that individuation is not reduced to interactions between norms and existing values on the one hand and consciousness/thinking of already formed individuals on the other.

All these curious theoretical considerations allow us to reconsider the notions of the individual and the subject, individuation and subjectivation. In social sciences, as well as in philosophy, the subject, in Michon's opinion, remains a vague spot, even though a lot has been done. For example, historians have long been studying the body in all its manifestations : sexuality, gender, perception, taste, smell, vision ; there is a lot of comprehensive research on sensibility, will, mind, memory, as well as emotions, feelings and imagination. There are persistent, even though not always successful, attempts to understand metamorphoses of identity. A great number of brilliant studies has been done in the context of historical anthropology. But modern historical anthropology, according to Michon, is 'a bouquet without a vase', for the only history that could give sense to this wonderful search - the history of the subject - has not yet been written.

According to Michon, there are two conditions that are the main obstacles in understanding the subject. Firstly, it is absolutizing the notion of the social both in the holistic perspective and that of methodological individualism, which leads to confusing the concepts of the subject and the individual. Secondly, within social sciences there is no linguistic theory which would not reduce linguistic activity to one of the social spheres. The dominant philosophical attitude reduces linguistic activity to language, which fortifies/supports/further supports the social/individual dualism in social sciences (i.e. the individual is opposed to the society).

Let me explain this in some more detail. After World War II the principal notion in social sciences was that of the social and philosophy was dominated by the concept of language. Neither the history of the subject, nor the historical

anthropology of the subject were of any interest. If the subject was studied at all, it was from the objectivistic viewpoint (body, sexuality, individual), as well as psychologically. No question of his inner dynamics was raised. However the development of the theory of linguistic activity and poetics opened new prospects. A number of authors (Mikhail Bakhtin, Émile Benveniste, Henri Meschonnic - showed that '*langage*' is not a mere subsystem of society, but an '*interprétant*' of the social. It is a kind of activity which makes it possible to constitute a human life, to interact with the world and the others. Nonetheless, social sciences keep seeing this activity only as one of the aspects of the social. We need a historical anthropology of the subject and the society which, according to Michon, is only possible when we acknowledge the primary role/supremacy of linguistic activity over social practices.

What do all these ideas have to do with power ? A lot. Politics cannot be understood without disclosing its attitude to the world, its attitude/relation to discourse, without considering/interpreting the processes of communication, individuation and subjectivation.

In modern world, argues Michon, traditional concepts of power do not work. Power can no more be presented in the notions of state domination or class struggle. In reality, the whole social body is woven through by power nets and power relations. However political power is still seen mostly as a simple consequence of an ability inherent in any individual. Human beings possess an ability to rationally determine what they need and what they should do in accordance with their interests. Political power allegedly embodies people's struggle to keep and improve their well-being, and in this light the state is envisaged as an institution/instrument (8=AB8BCB) that controls this struggle. Micro-analytical approaches to studying power relations, while retaining their importance in some cases, do not take into account the temporal dimension of interaction on different levels and in many ways can hardly be used to analyze modern phenomena and processes.

Power is not something given but rather a certain environment and a means in which and through which single and collective individuals are constituted, hierarchies to connect them are created, as well as 'domination effects', which become visible in the depths of such hierarchies. Today the dominant position belongs to the interactionist interpretation/understanding of power as a result of the interaction between the individuals and the system. However in different theories of the kind the question of subjectivation is not developed thoroughly enough although many theoreticians did make attempts to find some fundamental ideas/foundation here. For instance, Norbert Elias believed that the basic notion here could be that of *man of desire* (*l'homme de désir*). Still, the subjectivation process is more and more seen as the development of an actor, and it is no longer reduced to identification with self that is typical of neo-liberal ideas. The developing actor is understood as the agent of his own life. The English sociologist Margaret Archer is an example of such interpretation of the subjectivation process. By the way, she also uses the notion of rhythm, even though she employs its old interpretation as the change of strong and weak tempo.

In the light of 'the rhythmic organization of the individuation process' power is seen as 'the rhythmic medium'. In 1976, in his first lecture in Collège de France, Roland Barthes was one of the first people to mention that 'there is an inextricable link between power and rhythm. What power imposes in the first place is a rhythm (rhythm of everything - life, time, thought, discourse)'. In this lecture Barthes gives a specific example of rhythmic liquidity without requiring an obligatory vertical. It is Christian communities of hermit monks who lived in the third century AD. Barthes calls the way they lived together 'idiorrhhythmic'. The idea/purpose/underlying idea (!<KA;) of these communities was total individuation of their members. Each monk had to find their own rhythm of existence, including meal times, with the exception of one common meal a week. After Constantine the Great was baptized in 313 these communities were dismissed. Barthes comments here that idiorrhhythmic existence always conflicts with power.

Apparently, Michon is trying to find a way to explain the processes of individuation and subjectivation which would allow to describe their specific features/character in all historical moments in all societies. In order to understand power relations, he suggests that we should focus on the action and its organization, i.e. single out and describe 'the way/manner of flowing' (« <0=5@C B5G5=8O »), ways/realizations of bodily, linguistic and social activity, in the course of which single and collective individuals appear, find their own identity and disappear. At the same time

Michon adds complexity to the widely spread explanation of modern life by the general acceleration of historical development. Time is indeed an important constituent of such activity but the pace of its flow, in Michon's view, is not the determining factor. Rather, what is more important here is the ways 'the manners of flowing' of the main types of such activity - bodily, linguistic and social - are organized. This means that it is essential to show their rhythms, as well as the various qualities of single and collective individuals. To add to this, Michon proves the supremacy of linguistic activity (*langage*) in these 'manners of flowing'.

To be fair, even before Michon there were works which convincingly showed the primary role of discourse practices in specific societies. In one of his books Michon refers to a well-known book by the German linguist Victor Klemperer named 'The Language of the Third Reich', in which the latter demonstrated how the Nazi were able to penetrate into the individual family world by means of controlling the rhythms of language, for example by exploiting the obvious love for words of foreign origin or by giving some words derogatory meaning. Rank-and-file Germans did not understand these words but they were constantly used in propaganda and that significantly influenced their perception of the current events. We could give another impressive example of such discourse research. It is 'Analyzing Soviet Political Discourse' (Paris, 1985), a book by the French-Swiss linguist Patrick Sériot, in which he describes 'the Soviet way of operating language' in the course of a few decades of the Soviet regime. The discourse of the Soviet ideology of Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras was called 'wooden language' (*langue de bois*) among Russian speakers in France. It involved special use of language which revealed itself in more active use of some of its specific features, as well as in the development of special grammar and vocabulary usage. What is important to mention is that this process was not confined to the political sphere ; in fact, a special 'mental world' was being formed.

The social dimension of rhythmic individuation processes is certainly very important as well. In the light of the rhythmic theory many long-standing ideas are changed. For example, the social group is interpreted as a combination/set of various techniques that determine the ways in which human relations become liquid. This means that it is not the group that precedes the techniques but on the contrary it is the techniques that form and transform the group.

In conclusion, we could say that the new interpretation of rhythm is a useful tool for Michon to capture the individual in his liquidity. It opens up new opportunities, including those in power studies. And using rhythmic theory in social sciences makes interdisciplinarity and theoretical reflection an indispensable part of scholarly work.

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