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Roland Barthes and the Idiorhythms - Part 2

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



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Idiorhythmic Forms of Life

Remarkably, especially if we think of Lefebvre and Foucault, Barthes paid a lot of attention to the "everyday life" in the idiorhythmic communities. As a matter of fact, if politics was not to be confused with vertical power, it had to be grasped from the horizontal interactions of the members as well as from the personal life of each one of them.

Barthes' description of the idiorhythmic life crossed through successive layers. In a manner reminiscent of Mauss' and Evans-Pritchard's studies before WW2 (see Michon, 2005/2016), although he did not mention them, he first aimed at what could be termed *the rhythmic techniques of sociality*, particularly the regular alternation of moments of solitude and moments of interaction (Michon, 2007/2015c).

In the Alexandrian desert, for instance, everyone stayed alone five days a week; all practices were then entirely individual. By contrast, on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, all met at the church where they had a meal together (*agapè*), then prayed collectively (*synaxis*), sold the baskets they had made during the preceding week and bought the palm fibers, the salt and patties they needed for the next one. This alternation was, Barthes noticed, "the idiorhythmic model exactly: a balance between solitude and contact with other people" (p. 64). Similarly, on Mount Athos, there was no liturgical constraint; liturgies were optional, except for some night services and some big festivals. However, once a year, all idiorhythmic monks acted as a united community by having a meal together.

Barthes paid particular attention to the rhythms of nutrition, a question whose importance had already been noted by Simmel around 1900 (see Michon, 2005/2016). The irregularity of meals in idiorhythmic communities was partly linked to that of resources. The alternation of undernourishment and a sudden excess of food was common until late in the 19th century. Still in Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826), "the table [was seen] as display, as potlatch" (pp. 102-103). It was coenobitism that for the first time developed the systematic regulation of food. At first, in the rule of Saint Pachomius (314 AD), there was a daily alternation between one meal, taken freely by each monk, and another one taken together in a refectory. Then, from the rule of Saint Benedict (516 AD), the meals were mandatorily taken together according to a rigid schedule, while a monk read a pious text.

Then Barthes focused on the notion of space, in a manner that was this time strongly evocative of Lefebvre's notion of "appropriate space." How space was concretely appropriated and used appeared to him as "the fundamental problem of Living-Together and consequently of this lecture course."

Living-Together, especially idiorrhhythmic Living-Together, implies an ethics (or a physics) of a distance between cohabiting subjects. The problem is formidable one without doubt the fundamental problem of Living-Together and consequently of this lecture course. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 72)

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Barthes meticulously described the spaces in which experiences of idiorhythmic life have been led through the ages: the desert, the Greek skites (*askitica* = place of asceticism), the houses (*kellion*), the constellations of hermitages scattered on Mount Athos, the medieval beguine convents, and even the modern Sri Lankan convents. Whereas monasteries and phalansteries used one building or one integrated complex of buildings, all those places were built at a distance from one another.

The very principle of the idiorhythmic space (phalansteries, monasteries, communities): small houses, hermitages inhabited by two or three people: *curtes* [courtyard or atrium]; built in the precincts of a church + near a hospital and running water. That beguinal quarter ([=] a separate parish): high walls, its door kept open in the daytime. Has its own cemetery. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 39, my mod.)

In the desert mountains of Nitria, south of Alexandria, where, in the 4th century, about 5 000 anchorites lived, including 600 of them out in deep desert, Barthes described the particular spatial arrangement of their quarters around a common "central service" area but at "some distance from the others," that allowed them to visit each other while being able to live in solitude.

Organizing principle: each subject lies in his own hut, situated at some distance from the others, meaning that they live in solitude but can still visit one another. Nitria: a very flexible model: Space: "the central services": a large church, seven bread oven, a guesthouse [...] several doctors. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 39, same idea, p. 42)

Like Mauss describing the winter Eskimo dwellings grouped around the *kashim* the collective meeting house located at the center of the igloos (Michon, 2005/2016) Barthes noted that these forms of habitat, he called "constellation," were usually centered on a collective but uninhabited space which was the spatial representation of the absence of central power.

Thematic idea (the model, the productive configuration): the twelve tribes around the Tabernacle. Different groups spread around an uninhabited centre = the very principles of idiorhythmic organizations (I'd like a less voluntarist term: constellations?). Cf. Nitria, Athos, beguinages, Port-Royal (empty center: the church, place where people eat). (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 51)

Digging even deeper, Barthes returned several times to the space of the cell or the chamber (*cella*, *kellia*), which, insofar as it enabled the individual to isolate him- or herself, constituted another spatial "foundation" of idiorhythmy. In Ancient Times, the sleeping room combined matrimonial-family with warehouse functions. In Homer, *ho thalamos* was both a bedroom and a repository where valuable goods were kept. By contrast, the 4th century eremitic hut was one of the origins of the individual bedroom. It was a place and a tool that became indispensable for the development of idiorhythmy. Hence the adage: "*cella continuata duscelscit* (it is pleasant to remain in one's room)" (p. 52). And since everything that happened in the room was removed from the reach of supervision, Barthes concluded, like Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*: the "fight for a room = the fight for freedom" (p. 52).

Borrowing from the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1914-2009) the notion of "proxemics," i.e. the study of

the human use of space, whether personal or public, in different cultures, Barthes' description finally focused on the few personal objects that accompanied the individual monks. The lamp and the bed, in particular, seemed to him significant idiorhythmic tools. Like Walter Benjamin (Michon, 2005/2016), he noted that we badly needed a "history of lighting" because it directly determined the life forms (p. 112). Ceiling lamps were not favorable to "proxemics nor interiority." Suspended lamps, by contrast, made possible a "family proxemics around the dinner table." But only individual lamps created the conditions of a strong "individual proxemics" by isolating the writing desk and the armchair from the "dark nothingness" (pp. 112-113).

Concerning the bed, characterized as "the strongest form of proxemics [...] in some ways, a part of the body; a prosthesis of the body, like a fifth limb," Barthes noted that "the Athonite monks (before monasteries were established) [had] no possession whatsoever, nowhere to live and no belongings, but would travel by foot, carrying their sole item of furniture on their backs: the mat they slept on at night" (p. 113).

Barthes described quite precisely the practices carried out within these spaces, noticing in passing the role of *the rhythmic techniques of the body and the discourse* (Michon, 2007/2015c) which were interwoven with the techniques of the sociality previously described.

[Every anchorite governs himself *[se gouverne]* as he sees fit]: private prayer + manual labor (basket-making, weaving, braiding), accompanied by chanting. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 25, my mod.)

Similarly, in Nitria.

Lifestyle: six days in the *cella*; weaving baskets while: meditatively reciting the Scriptures (*melete*, looking after oneself, study, declamation, meditation). (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 64)

And later, on mount Athos, Barthes noticed, the prayer was strikingly "based on the cadences of respiration and the heart; [according to the] Byzantine pneumatology" (p. 31).

On Some Difficulties of Idiorhythmy

One specificity of Barthes' perspective was that it took into account the limits of the ethical and political experiences he described. If idiorhythmy had a strong appeal, it had also some noticeable drawbacks that should not be hidden.

Unlike Foucault, whose latest studies in *The History of Sexuality* (vol. 2 and 3, 1984) were entirely centered on the positive behaviors induced by the "*souci de soi* - care of the self," Barthes noted, parallel to the idyllic side of idiorhythmy, the loss of self-esteem, the investment failure, the acedia (*akèdia*) that sometimes affected the monks who lost any desire for asceticism or could no longer invest in it. Acedia was "the repeated, extenuated, insistent moment when you find you've had enough of our way of life, of our relationship to the world (to the 'worldly')" (p. 22).

Barthes, moreover, never lost an opportunity to emphasize the final collapse of most idiorhythmic communities,

whether in the past or in the present, and the main reasons responsible for it.

In Greece, for example, some idiorhythmic forms reappeared towards the end of the 14th century, however it was due more to a certain leniency of the monastic institutions than because of a chosen life project. In addition, in these new idiorhythmic communities, the reappearance of property led to "a reinstatement of a social divide" which opposed "those with a private income and those who had no revenue of their own: the *paramikri*, often employed by the rich" (p. 34).

Similarly, in the 1920s in the USSR, or in the 1960s-1970s in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, most communities shattered because of the return of the couple and ownership (pp. 8, 42-43). They never clearly faced, Barthes commented, the contradiction between the desires and the needs. To take pleasure without limits, yes! but: "Thorny issue for modern 'communes': Who does the washing up?" (p. 75).

Most idiorhythmic communities could not but fail due to the weight of family and social models, to the difficulty to harmonize desires and needs, and naturally to the pressure of the power which immediately took advantage of these difficulties to destroy the original freedom.

Vulnerability of marginality; the authorities, whether external (coenobitism) or internal (Qumran), are always ready to intervene. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 66)

As a matter of fact, in order to know "who does the washing up" or to avoid the return of the couple and ownership, the idiorhythmic communities often converted to coenobitism and consequently to the vertical power associated with it.

Birth of coenobitism: the immediate and concomitant emergence of a bureaucratic apparatus, albeit just the beginnings of one. Executive agents: whoever was in charge for that week, the "*semainier*" (the rule of Saint Pachomius and the rule of Saint Benedict). Bureaucratism: a vigilant deity lying in wait for the merest hint of an idiorhythmic grouping, swooping down upon it the moment it starts to "take." (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 42)

Barthes was keenly aware of the limitations of his ethical and political proposition. From the start of his course (session of January 12, 1977), he explicitly recognized it as a "fantasy" that was either impossible to achieve or could only fail (p. 6).

It was, he explained, especially difficult to implement in the Modern world. Indeed, if, in order to match our contemporary way of life, we separated the idiorhythmic group from its religious *telos* (whether the search for perfection as in the West or the exercise of breathing-contemplation as in the East), all that was left was a vague *telos* based on the mere search for happiness, pleasure, sociability, considered as an end in itself, as for instance in Sade's narratives. The idiorhythmic group thus became an "homeostatic machine that runs by itself."

The group is defined as a pure homeostatic machine that runs by itself: a closed circuit of charge and expenditure. An idyllic view of worldliness: a machine with no goal, where there's no transformation, that generates pleasure in its purest form (cf. Sade's machines). (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 48)

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The Sadian imaginary representations of this utopian machine immediately revealed what made it impracticable. It presupposed a strict division of masters and servants into two worlds which were incommensurable with one another. It, above all, necessarily implied the "foreclosure of idiorhythmy" (p. 45).

There's no *rhuthmos*, whether for the victims (that goes without saying) or for the libertines: meticulously timed schedules, obsessively observed rites, implacable rhythm. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 45)

Even if one did not reduce the modern idiorhythmy to the Sadian machines, such "homeostatic" form of life was not viable in the class and competition society we were living in.

Homeostatis of the group: would be possible in a utopian world that has no class structure and no language. Because the fact is, as soon as you have language (enunciation), you have the staging or the setting up of a competition between a system of positions. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 48)

Because of the phenomena of secularization and individualization of our lives, and perhaps also due to the very linguistic condition of human beings, idiorhythmy appeared as an unachievable fantasy that defeated itself.

Fantasy of the idiorhythmic group: takes up the idea of Living-Together as *homeostasis*, as the everlasting preservation of the pure pleasure of sociability. However, in a more philosophical manner, it sheds its worldliness (which can't be dissociated from competing for position) and fantasizes the following paradox: the idiorhythmic project involves the impossible (superhuman) establishment of a group whose *Telos* would be perpetually to destroy itself as a group. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 48)

Another limitation acknowledged by Barthes was the impossibility to extend idiorhythmy to the whole society. It seemed possible only in very small groups. It was, as Barthes noticed with a certain melancholy, a "fantasy of a free life lived among just a few other people" (p. 41).

[A] small, flexible [group] of several individuals who are attempting to live together (within a certain proximity to one another), while each preserving his or her *rhuthmos*. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 48, my mod.)

It was more of a "domestic utopia" than a "social utopia" (p. 130). According to Barthes, the "optimal number" of an idiorhythmic group "should be under ten or under eight even" (p. 131).

To these self-acknowledged limitations of the idiorhythmic ethical and political ideal, we can add at least two other problems.

First, the State appeared in Barthes' analyzes only in a negative and indirect way. Borrowing from Benveniste and joining here probably without knowing it with Simmel and Granet (see Michon, 2005/2016) and soon with Deleuze & Guattari (see below) he noted that, etymologically, *Rex* did not mean a leader but the one who traces lines (*regula, rego, orégô*), in other words, the one who delimits the consecrated spaces (cities, territories) (pp. 114, 116). From this point of view, the rectangle was "the basic shape of power" (p. 114), sometimes taking the form of a square which was "a pure mental form (often esoteric) of the rectangle" (p. 114). Likewise, the rule (*regula*) was "a way of stretching time out in a straight line, of delimiting zones (of time, of actions)" (p. 118).

However, the actual relation of these metric rhythms to the idiorhythms was not elaborated. They were simply presented as exclusive of each other.

The idiorhythmy is an [individualist - *individualiste*] solution to the crisis of power. I flee, I reject power, the world, systems; I want to create a life-structure that isn't a life-system [*une structure de vie qui ne soit pas un appareil de vie*]. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 26, my mod.)

Anchorites, hermits marginalized themselves with respect to the State. Egypt: for the most part and above all, individuals avoiding taxation or military service. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 91)

In short, the State was conceived in a non-dialectical way as a structure imposing an order upon the naturally free individuals, as a sheer heteronomic principle opposed to any personal autonomy. But one could wonder if the protection and help provided by the State was not sometimes useful, especially for individuals in the poorer classes.

The second issue concerned the rhythmological assumptions that supported Barthes' perspective. Whereas he explicitly redefined the concept of rhythm according to Benveniste's rediscovery of its Ancient pre-Platonic meaning and thus placed his essay in the continuity of a pragmatic linguistics of enunciation he was often caught up by his former structuralist perspective. On the one hand, he noted with great accuracy the opposition of the *rhuthmos* to any structure.

Rhuthmos: a rhythm that allows for approximation, for imperfection, for a supplement, a lack, an *idios*: what doesn't fit the structure [*ce qui n'entre pas dans la structure*], or would have to be made to fit. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 35)

But, on the other hand, he stumbled against his own epistemological assumptions. He recognized that the structuralist opposition system was no longer able to describe idiorhythmic phenomena, but he did not propose anything to replace it.

That methodology is not interested in quantity, its concern is the opposition between terms, it is not especially interested in variations in quantity: strictly speaking the + and -, + and - are not notions that can partake of a structural analysis. (*How to live together*, 1977, trans. Kate Briggs, 2012, p. 122, n. 3/p. 195)

This is why the context in which the *rhuthmos*, the idiorhythmy, were inserted, was still presented as structural and domineering, and the idiorhythm itself as an excess or a mere deviation from cultural and social norms: "Remember Casal's formulation: rhythm is delay" (p. 35). But, as for his conception of the State, this view disregarded the real interaction between individuals and institutions and reduced power to a mere effect of the system or the structure, entirely escaping the action of individuals.

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1. As we see, Barthes was going in the same direction as Lefebvre and Foucault.

1.1 Since the old Structuralist universalism heralded by Levi-Strauss was dying, and mainstream Marxism was on the verge of collapse, since he also rejected as his two predecessors the coming neoindividualism and maybe its deconstructionist and postmodern counterparts, he too thought that the *rhythmic organization of life* was worth historically studying and theoretically as well as ethically and politically elaborating.

1.2 But, contrary to Lefebvre and Foucault, who concentrated on the actual rhythmic techniques of colonization of space and everyday life, or dressage and discipline, he explored the utopian side of rhythm, the new forms of life that could be opposed to these rhythmic techniques. Although it had no impact at the time, due mainly to a lack of publication and Barthes' sudden death three years later, his reflection on idiorhythmic communities opened up a new and important line of research. This was the first time, at least in the second part of the 20th century, that ethical and political theory were explicitly based on the notion of rhythm of life.

2. We have seen that this major change of perspective was clearly allowed by the introduction into the debate of the notion of *rhuthmos*, as "impermanent form" as well maybe as "way of flowing."

2.1 Since the latter was introduced and discussed during the very first session, we may even say that the whole lecture course *How to Live Together* was actually a long comment, or a mere expansion of these introductory remarks concerning Benveniste's rhythmological contribution.

2.2 By resuming with the pre-Platonic concept of rhythm, Barthes was able to overcome some limitations of Lefebvre's as well as Foucault's attempts. Whereas Foucault did not even envisage at least in *Discipline and Punish* any alternative to the disciplinary rhythmic forms of life, and whereas Lefebvre, in merely opposing the cyclical-traditional to the linear-modern rhythms, entirely remained within the metric Platonic frame, Barthes determinedly and decisively jumped out of it and could lay down the bases of a subtle ethical and political rhythmic utopia that could even envisage its own failure, its own exhaustion, its possible collapse.

2.3 I suggested in the conclusion of the previous chapter that Benveniste's study concerning the ancient materialist concept of *rhuthmos* could possibly have provided Foucault with the concepts he needed to address the complex epistemological issues he was facing. We now see, thanks to Barthes' particular use of the same study, that it could also have helped him to address as well some limitations of his ethical and political perspective, which did not take into account neither the resistance and actions of the individuals, nor any utopian dimension.

3. This naturally does not mean that Barthes' attempt was without limitations of its own.

3.1 His own concept of State was surely a bit simplistic and he developed rather crude anarchist views. As in some current libertarian and neoliberal views, the State was considered as evil and necessarily opposed to individual freedom.

3.2 Although Barthes had the great virtue to prolong Benveniste's contribution concerning the concept of *rhuthmos*, he was still a bit hesitant about its meaning. Instead of considering it in its positivity, from what it was, he characterized it from what it was not and finally reduced it to a mere deviation or difference from the norm, which was a way to reintroduce the dualistic view that he had just put aside. The *rhuthmos* which had just emerged was still to be discovered in its full conceptual range and consequences. As a matter of fact, this was to happen thanks to other thinkers of the time whom I will consider in the next chapters.

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