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Pascal MICHON, Rythmes, pouvoir, mondialisation

- Lectures
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Pascal Michon

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P. Michon, *Rythmes, pouvoir, mondialisation*, Paris, PUF, coll. Pratiques théoriques, 2005, 467 p.

Pascal Michon's book is the third installment in his project of reconfiguring our understanding of modernity. His first book, *Éléments d'une histoire du sujet* (Kimé, 1999), challenges the reigning assumptions about how to theorize subjectivity across the premodern/modern divide. *Poétique d'une anti-anthropologie. L'Herméneutique de Gadamer* (Vrin, 2000) dissects the limits of Heidegger and Gadamer's philosophies of language for exploring linguistic diversity of historical communities. His new book introduces the idea of rhythm "social, corporeal, and linguistic" in order to give us new ways to articulate the on-going transformations in our globalized world.

Michon begins with an overview of theories of globalization. Although there is a general consensus that the structures that gave the post-World War II West its stability are giving way to new fluidity, the vocabulary for discussing the new modes of ordering is not adequate. Some studies speak of a movement from the individual/systemic model to postmodern network. In this view, the world is "organized through assemblages of connections that are in constant mutation" (4-5) [1]. Others speak of the determining role of technology, whether in optimistic or pessimistic scenarios, but ignore the shaping forces of language and culture [2]. While acknowledging the insights of these studies on the new network technologies, Michon maintains that we need "an approach that can recognize forms of movement of individuation" (14). He proposes that we go back before 1945 to the period of the first globalization 1890-1940 and look at the work of a broad range of thinkers from anthropology, sociology, linguistics and literary theory [3]. Michon probes these thinkers in order to develop the concept of rhythm, understood "as a complex temporal organization of processes by which psychic and collective individual are produced" (17). This conception of rhythmic individuation "will permit us to articulate forms of micro power penetrating the body with the forms of macro political and state imperial forms." (14).

The argument develops through a series of detailed reconstructions of the work of each figure on rhythm. The reconstructions are in a progressive sequence so that the treatment of each figure adds one new conceptual level. This mode of development requires patience from the reader, as Michon says upfront, but he wants to give complex examples that preserve the integrity of each figure's thought rather than subordinating their contributions to an overreaching thesis. Indeed, one of Michon's points is that we need open to new analytic avenues of research before developing a comprehensive response to globalization.

In the first chapter, he examines the work of Mauss and Evans-Pritchard on primitive societies "work so often trapped in structuralist readings [4]" in order to show their contribution to rhythm. Mauss's Eskimos, for instance, have different modes of social articulation in summer and winter. In the warm season, when the people are dispersed, they exhibit relatively autonomous forms of subjectivity, acting in an individualistic and almost secular way, but in winter, they live in close interactive dependence with an intense religious life and collective legal norms. Evans-Pritchard, in his study of the Nuer, reveals that social movements are organized not only around seasonal movements of gathering and dispersion but through terms of alliance and conflict inside and outside the society (57). In recovering the work of these thinkers and others, Michon does not ignore their limits "here he acknowledges that Mauss and Evans-Pritchard remain under the sway of an evolutionary view of individuality and are thus drawn into sweeping, inaccurate generalizations (101)" but he does not let methodological or empirical problems discredit their contributions.

From social rhythm, Michon moves to corporeal rhythm, analyzing the work of Granet on ancient Chinese society (*La Pensée chinoise*), a differentiated society where the political is separated and institutionalized rather in immanent, as in the previous examples. He concludes the chapter by showing how the work of Mauss, Evans-Pritchard and Granet together permit us to investigate the relationship between the rhythms of individual and

state power (94), comparing the work of these anthropologists with Ernst Kantorowicz's well-known study *The King's Two Bodies : A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*. "Just like the first kings of ancient China, western sovereigns became the organizers of space and time, as well as the regulators of the rhythms of the societies they dominated" (98).

Leaving nonwestern societies, Michon turns to social theorists who analyze the breakdown of traditional rhythms in the modern West. He follows this breakdown through the sociological work of Gabriel Tarde on role of media in creating arhythmical publics (e.g., *L'Opinion et la foule* (1901)) and of Georg Simmel on the ways that money starts to break off the economy from its social embeddedness. Michon pursues the consequences of these changes in external rhythms for the psychic formation of the subject by turning to Freud's social writings (*Totem and Tabou, The Ego and the Id*. Freud develops a concept of psychic rhythm, showing how rhythm is not binary but oscillatory (163). All of these thinkers sense the political consequences of these rhythmic transformations. Freud, like Tarde and Simmel, concludes that new fluidity following the disappearance of traditional rhythms "can offer increased individual liberty but also great harbors great dangers for the stability and freedom of the society as a whole" (179). Freud sees that the more rapid and profound the change in rhythm "the greater will be the need for new rhythms and the greater will be the possibility that a power capable of giving them will impose itself" (183).

While this group of thinkers gives politically conservative warnings about the loss of traditional rhythms (183-189), Ossip Mandelstam and Siegfried Kracauer respond by addressing the utopian dimension of rhythm, looking to popular culture, such as gymnastics, dance, travel, jazz, and opera [5]. Kracauer's dialectical reading of these phenomena enables him to get beyond the opposition between the traditional rhythms of the past and the mechanical rhythms of modernity. For Kracauer, the changes in social rhythm show us our radical historicity and our capacity to find new rhythms beyond the existing possibilities of liberal democracy and dictatorship (217). In his book on Offenbach, Kracauer shows how the operetta "was at the center of a new mode of managing political contradictions and the subjectification of the masses... From this point of view, the Second Empire prefigures the regimes, which in the twentieth century, will respond to the loss of rhythm by putting in place an absolute power supported by new rhythms of propaganda provided by film and radio" (291-2).

To illustrate the next level of rhythmic complexity, language (*langage*), Michon draws on the work of Walter Benjamin and Victor Klemperer. Although Benjamin's research builds on work of his predecessors in the 1920, unlike previous sociologists, Benjamin looks at technological apparatus not just as a prosthesis for communication but as a transformation in the forms of experience—e.g., the desacralization of culture through mechanical reproduction. In his study of Baudelaire, Benjamin sketches the historical interaction between Baudelaire's reworking of traditional poetic rhythm and the "derhythming" of modern society (263). Baudelaire's poetry leaves the psychic depths of the Romantics in order to register the experience of "*le choc*" (260) through lexical incongruities, explosive allegories, and violations of metrical norms. "The bumps and collisions in Baudelaire's poetic discourse enable him simultaneously to register the grand socio-anthropological changes of his epoch and lay out a 'politics of art' opening up a life less governed by meter and more autonomous" (263). The prose poems register the unexpected invasion of the time as well as the fluidity and new liberties of the modern world (265).

These rhythmical resources permit us to get new insight into totalitarianism, as we see in Victor Klemperer's study *The Language of the Third Reich LTI-Lingua Tertii Imperii : A Philologist's Notebook*. Klemperer's analysis distinguishes three rhythmic levels : the "le culte"—the gathering and "rhythming" of the masses in quasi-religious ceremonies ; the new forms of eloquence, and the bodily rhythms of the sovereign (374). Klemperer's study complicates historiographical debates about the Third Reich. For instance, while Hannah Arendt speaks of atomized subjects who lost a world, Daniel Goldhagen claims the Germans killed with pleasure [6]. Both sides ignore the new forms of individuation discussed by Klemperer that brought people out of their malaise, even at the expense of autonomy (390) : "The ideology [of the Third Reich] is immanent to their activities and linguistic interactions" (374).

These lacuna in Arendt's and Goldhagen's discussions are symptomatic of the blind spots of social scientific theories

that oscillate between individualism and holism : "Instead of positing the existence of a being antecedent to the movements that animate it, we must start from these movements in order to understand how these psychic and collective beings are formed" (422). Hence, an individual is thus "a body/language in continuous transformation," a transformation that "follows the social-historical forms shared by many others" (424). Individuals are chains of interaction that differ through time (423), whose processes of individuation can be broken into four levels : "the alternations of sociality, the oscillations of psyche, the mobility of the body and the organization of discourse" (429). This definition of individuation means that "power" – whether the macropower of the state, the power of Foucault's dispositifs or the micropowers dispersed in multitudes – consists of organizing, controlling, and influencing these transformations" (424-5).

Michon's study of rhythm offers a grand vision of a neglected dimension of modern existence that is then laid out through a meticulous argumentative exposition. This extraordinary work will be of great interest to scholars in all areas of the humanities and social sciences.

[1] Michon cites Boltanski and Chiapello, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris : Gallimard, 1999), 157.

[2] Another strain of analysis (Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman) urges that we try to slow down these processes so that new forms of power can be realized.

[3] He deliberately sets aside the work of philosophers during the period, such as Bergson. After 1940, the idea of rhythm was largely abandoned by social science – e.g., various types of structuralism. There were exceptions, of course, such as Foucault's *Surveiller et punir*, which Michon cites.

[4] E.g. See Lévi-Strauss, « Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss, » in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1950) and Louis Dumont on Evans-Pritchard « Préface, *Les Nuer* (Paris : Gallimard, 1994).

[5] Michon is concerned principally with Mandelstam's "The State and Rhythm" (1920), in *Complete Prose and Letters* (Ann Arbor : Ardis, 1979) and Kracauer's *Das Ornament der Masse* (1927) and Jacques Offenbach *und das paris seiner Zeit*.

[6] Goldhagen says, "Contrary to Arendt's assertions the perpetrators were not such atomized, lonely beings" [*Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York : Knopf, 1996), 581].