

<http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article2356>

# Rhythm as Ethical and Political Principle (part 2)

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
- Économie classique et marxiste



Publication date: Saturday 9 March 2019

---

Copyright © Rhuthmos - All rights reserved

---

Sommaire

- [Rhythm as Principle of a Third Way \(Bücher - 1899\)](#)
- [The Third Way as Metric Policy \(Bücher - 1899\)](#)
- [Rhythm and Non-Market Economics \(Bücher - 1918\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

## Rhythm as Principle of a Third Way (Bücher - 1899)

From the outset, Bücher's essay attracted a lot of attention among dancers, musicians, poets, and pedagogues *naturally*, one is tempted to add. As a matter of fact, according to Bücher's view, these artists and educators were not only the precious custodians of age-old forms of life, they were also endowed with the mission of reforming modern life by bringing rhythm back into it. They were designated as the heralds of a new ethics and maybe a new politics of rhythm. Since their contributions have been extraordinarily numerous and influential, since they also developed beyond the limits of my current investigation into science, I will survey at least some of them in another volume. However, I won't shy away from addressing in this chapter the ethical and political dimension of Bücher's suggestions. This will give me the opportunity to pay homage to some of the more recent studies devoted to Bücher which have been instrumental for my better understanding of his work.

In a groundbreaking article published in 1996, Michael Golston has demonstrated the rapid and extensive spread, between 1890 and 1940, of an interest in the subject of rhythm in a vast array of natural as well as human sciences: "psychology, physiology, musicology, eugenics, genetics, the science of work, pedagogy, aesthetics, and political propaganda." For the first time, the link between the rhythmic research led during the last decades before WW1 and the use of rhythm in youth education and political propaganda, especially in the Fascist and Nazi regimes, was brought to light (Golston, 1996).

Although I do agree with Golston on the broad lines of his analysis (see Michon 2016, 1st ed. 2005), I do not follow him concerning his particular assessment of Bücher's ethical and political position. Golston notes that Bücher "complains that industrial machinery alienates human labor because it does not operate at a human tempo" but he neglects the norm of handicraft rhythm he opposed to this alienation. He, therefore, clearly overlooks his critique of the modern industrial world and ignore the fact that, for Bücher, both kinds of rhythm should not be confused with each other. As a result, Golston mistakenly presents Bücher as a supporter of a modern world entirely "structured by rhythms," as if he did not make any distinction between them, and, not less incorrectly, as a mere promoter of work management based on the automatization of the work force.

For Bücher, the entire domain of work, from the micro-level human body to the macro-level industrial corporation, is structured by the rhythms which fundamentally inform twentieth-century "machine-age" social fabrics, and which facilitate labor like "lubrication keeps the machine going" [...] Bücher looks forward to a time when the rhythms of machines and humans will be more perfectly integrated. (Golston, 1996 - same in Golston, 2008, p. 22)

## Rhythm as Ethical and Political Principle (part 2)

Moreover, Golston presents him as a strong proponent of a totally integrated state in which, by the virtue of "a transcendental medium," the rhythm, "the automated subject would operate under the illusion of being inextricably fused and profoundly incorporated into a highly and systematically organized social body."

A proper understanding and use of rhythm, then, may permit the establishment of a transcendental medium in which mind and body, labor and culture, industry and art, and subject and state can be totally integrated: penetrated and permeated by an environment itself constructed of and saturated in carefully controlled, syncopating rhythms, the automated subject of such a state must necessarily operate under the illusion of being inextricably fused and profoundly incorporated into a highly and systematically organized social body. (Golston, 1996 - same in Golston, 2008, p. 23)

I should say that I carefully read the first as well as the second version of *Labor and Rhythm* and I did not find one single hint of such political conception. The integrated state which Golston aims at is the one described by Plato (see vol. 1, chap. 2) which certainly has already found some echo in the *Lebensreform* movement before WW1 although it is something that remains to be carefully investigated. It is also clearly the kind of state promoted by totalitarian regimes in the first half of the 20th century which used rhythm as a means of political domination. But, as we have seen, Bücher did not explicitly envisage such kind of politics. He still was a plain liberal, at least according to late 19th century standards. His critique of the new industrial world could certainly be deemed unfit, weak, and idealistic, reflecting the hopes, fear and limits of his intellectual milieu, but it was certainly not based on an authoritarian agenda.

Although he mentioned the question of rhythm only in passing, Woodruff D. Smith was certainly closer to the truth when he emphasized, a few years before Golston, Bücher's opposition to Marx and Marxist thinkers of his time and his desire to develop a cultural and anthropological critique of modern alienation which would avoid a revolutionary change in the social order. As most of his colleagues of the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, Bücher opposed simultaneously the classical Anglo-French and the newer Marxist economics, trying to find a "third way."

The main thrust of Bücher's approach to cultural and social science was the idea of updating the traditional theoretical pattern of liberal social science to make it more directly applicable to modern industrial society. Bücher attempted to explain the nature of modern socioeconomic structure and behavior, and particularly of contemporary class conflict and alienation, in the context of cultural evolution. According to Bücher, alienation primarily a psychological condition arose when the modes of production characteristic of a society at a particular time were out of harmony with the culture that predominated among the people. Reduction of alienation, and thus the reduction of social and political conflict, occurred when production and culture were adjusted to each other. This adjustment was not one-sided, as Marx had implied. The impetus to historical change may arise more often than not from production, but this is not inevitably the case, and in a stable society production adjusts itself to the prevailing culture as much as the elements of culture adjust themselves to production. By *culture*, Bücher meant not just the ethical norms that concerned the more sociologically inclined social scientists at the turn of the century, but also such things as the rhythm and timing of work and leisure, the learned psychological frameworks within which people view the significance of their labor, their family roles, their play, and so forth essentially anthropological factors. (Smith, 1991, p. 199.)

This diagnosis has been convincingly substantiated by Olivier Hanse in his recent and excellent PhD thesis (2010) from which I borrow the material used in the next paragraphs. Bücher belonged to a social group composed of "*Bildungsbürger* - educated bourgeois" such as university professors, high school teachers, officials, civil servants,

medical doctors, lawyers, protestant ministers, journalists, writers, etc. Around 1900, this educated middle class constituted a relatively homogeneous group in German society which tended to reject primary school teachers or engineers deemed inferior but which was, at the same time, quite welcoming to artists and bohemians. Excluded from political careers since the failed revolution of 1848 until 1918, these educated bourgeois tended to consider academic or artistic achievements as genuine title of nobility. (Hanse, 2010, p. 40)

At the end of the 19th century, this group felt its social position threatened, on the one side, by the new industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, whose power it considered illegitimate because it was based on mere financial superiority, and on the other side, by the workers, who were exploited and bearing the brunt of the successive economic crises, but represented, in its view, a frightening threat to the whole society. (Hanse, 2010, p. 41)

In addition, the growing influence of the state on the organization of universities, the regress of the humanistic model of education in favor of more practical trainings manifested in the development of *Realgymnasien* and engineering studies, questioned their prestige and threatened them with impoverishment. (Hanse, 2010, p. 41)

Finally, as far as art was concerned, the educated bourgeois, who had retained until the end of the 19th century the monopoly on the definition of the aesthetic norms, realized that this symbolic power was rapidly collapsing. Since the Naturalist movement, the artists had begun to deny the aesthetic and moral values of their milieu, and thus had contributed to shake the cultural hegemony of the educated bourgeoisie. (Hanse, 2010, p. 41)

Confronted with this intricate situation, the *Bildungsbürger* reacted ambiguously. Frighten by the rise of the labor movement, they reluctantly sided with the Wilhelminian Reich and even some conservative forces, which they regarded as the best bulwark against a coming socialist revolution. But, at the same time, holding true to the liberalism inherited from 1848, and looking enviously at the French and English examples of bourgeoisie triumph, they attempted to lay the foundations of a "third way" that would ensure to themselves the leadership that they were convinced to deserve. (Hanse, 2010, p. 41)

This "third way" remarkably excluded any direct political or union involvement and preferably followed circuitous routes. It limited itself to develop a counterculture whose values and mores opposed both the "mammonism" of capitalist society and the "materialism" of the labor movement. This could be achieved by means of various kinds of life reforms such as the foundation of rural communities collectively owning and laboring the land, the development of garden cities as in Hellerau near Dresden, the transformation of food and medicine, the practice of nudism and naturism. (Hanse, 2010, p. 42 sq.)

Faced with such anxieties and frustrations, the educated bourgeois in search of a new normative culture as well as means of action on society found in Bücher's book the description of a golden age of artistry, joyful work, and brotherhood that could be recovered at a higher level of human evolution. The rhythmic work of primitives as reconstructed by the economist was seen as the guarantee of cohesion, coordination and solidarity among men, that is, the exact opposite of the class conflict which seemed to threaten German society. (Hanse, 2010, p. 166)

Unlike the machine, which shaped man in its mechanized and callous image separating the workers from each other, the rhythm turned individuals into a cohesive work community. It boosted their strength, helped them to unite against the need, and gave the most difficult tasks a festive turn, sometimes reinforced by the presence of musicians. Thanks to its beneficial power, the tyranny of productivity and the inhuman exploitation of workers would give way to a labor accomplished with joy and conviviality, and which would provide the individual with a real sense of pride. If the modern worker could be submitted to bodily and spiritual techniques inspired by the ancient rhythm, he would certainly better accept his condition and come to terms with the rest of the society. (Hanse, 2010, p. 166)

In addition, the model described by Bücher suggested a close proximity between the working world and the cultural and artistic sphere. Firstly, it highlighted the fact that the objects produced by the primitives were endowed with a remarkable degree of aesthetic finish which seemed to prove that, originally, workers were also artists and vice versa. Secondly, in primitive societies, team working, dance, and song were barely distinguishable, they were governed by the same rules and provided the same pleasure. Thirdly, dance, poetry, and music emanated directly from work, which determined their rhythm and even their themes. All evidence seemed to call for an alliance between workers, artists and educated bourgeois. (Hanse, 2010, p. 167)

In this new world, the *Bildungsbürger* would not feel any longer out of step with the rest of society. They would, on the contrary, appear as the main agents of social cohesion, endowed with a function which would earn them pride and respect. (Hanse, 2010, p. 167)

In short, *Arbeit und Rhythmus* presented the educated middle class with both an ideal and a way to reach it. To most of his readers, rhythm began to appear simultaneously as a powerful educational tool and a subtle means of control, whose spreading in the society would help gently discipline the individuals, structure the social body and improve its coordination. In more political terms, it would channel the working class by an overall improvement of its environment, that would make it happier, more efficient, and strip it from any desire to rise above his condition. (Hanse, 2010, p. 168)

## The Third Way as Metric Policy (Bücher - 1899)

The interpretation developed by Olivier Hanse is quite convincing. It covers a bunch of historical facts and suggests a large and credible sociohistorical analysis. Nevertheless, we may wonder if it tells the whole story.

Hanse's narrative borrows from contemporary German historians such as Klaus Vondung (\*1941) and Georg Bollenbeck (\*1947), who themselves resumed with a very famous analysis developed by Norbert Elias (1897-1990) on the eve of WW2. In his great book *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation - The Civilizing Process* published in 1939 and which met with enormous success in the 1970s, Elias already recognized the *Bildungsbürger* living at the end of the 18th century as the main initiators of what will later be called the "German national character." Due to their mediocre socioeconomic position, strictly barred from any political activity, these "educated people" developed reform programs which aimed principally at transforming the life of the individuals from within and shied away from any political involvement. It was them who introduced into German culture the respect for personal *Bildung*, for *Kultur* as opposed to *Zivilisation*, for sentimentality as opposed to court or economic rationality, for inwardness and authenticity as opposed to civility and superficiality. All those ethical principles many of which were promoted again by the *Bildungsbürger* at the end of the 19th century appeared, according to Elias, as "polemical inversions" of the values and mores of French or English origin practiced by the German aristocratic elites.

But we have seen in volume 2 that, from a rhythmological viewpoint, at the end of the 18th century the opposition between French and Germanic culture was much less stringent than it seemed in the eyes of the sociologist. Moritz, Schiller, Goethe, Schlegel, Hölderlin, and Humboldt actually resumed with and elaborated further reflections already developed by Diderot, who himself discussed theories proposed by Spinoza and Leibniz in the previous century. As far as rhythm was concerned, all of these authors rejected its traditional metric definition and replaced it with a novel one which somehow revived the ancient concept of *rhuthmos*. Noticeably, the spread of this new trend of ideas prompted in Germany a strong reaction from specialists of metrics as Hermann, and philosophers interested in literature and aesthetics as Schelling and Hegel. Therefore, at least as far as rhythm was concerned, the dividing line did not run between French and Germans as much as between the *Platonic metric paradigm*, on the one side, and the *Democritean physical* and *Aristotelian poetic paradigms*, on the other side. (see vol. 2, chap. 3 and 4)

Concerning the spread of rhythm at the end of the 19th century through works such as Bücher's, Hanse's sociohistorical interpretation has therefore the same merit and the same limit as those of his predecessors. It is remarkably enlightening but, at the same time, in need to be completed with a larger rhythmological evaluation. It presents a clear picture of the social determinations of the educated middle class but overlooks a crucial point: the blatant contradiction of a cultural critique that intended to reinsert artistic concerns into economics and the working world, but that, paradoxically, entirely ignored the most innovative contributions to the theory of rhythm made by the artists of the second half of the 19th century, and used instead a concept borrowed more or less directly from an old Greek philosopher named Plato, who considered art as a dangerous activity for the citizens and wanted the poets to be excluded from the City-State (see vol. 1, chap 2).

In addition to the sociohistorical interpretation, we must therefore emphasize that the concept of rhythm, that Bücher promoted in the educated middle class, is only one particular among others. What Bücher suggested was a kind of soft Platonic reform program which pleased the *Bildungsbürger* first because of its antiquity and cultural prestige, second because it endowed him with the symbolic power of the specialist and pedagogue, third because of its emphasis on the education of the soul through that of the body, and finally because of its disciplinary aspect which could help channel the undesired behavior and ideas in the lower classes of the society.

To put it in a nutshell, a correct assessment of the "third way" needs more than an analysis of the peculiar social position of the educated German middle class at the end of the 19th century; it must, in addition, provide a rhythmological critique of its program. This is the only way to differentiate between the legitimate desire to reintroduce artistic concerns into economics, ethics and politics, and its debatable disciplinary implementation by Bücher under the aegis of a Platonic metric concept of rhythm.

To shed more light on the matter, we can compare Bücher's view with that of Mauss (1872-1950) on the same subjects. Although this part of Mauss' work has been most of the time obfuscated by his successors until very recently, there is indeed, as we shall see below, plenty of evidence that proves that rhythm was essential to his anthropology as well as to his ethics and politics (see in French, Michon, 2015b, 2016). However, quite surprisingly, Mauss very rarely referred to Bücher's works. In his *Ruvres complètes* (1968-1969) and the collection published separately for copyright reasons under the title *Sociologie and Anthropologie* (1950), I found only four references to Bücher. The first was a mere philological indication, in a review written in 1906 of a book by the Dutch anthropologist F. D. E. van Ossenbruggen (1869-1950) on "the notion of land ownership" (*Ruvres*, 1969, vol. 2, p. 141). In 1923-1924, in the essay on the gift, Mauss criticized in a footnote Bücher's concept of "closed economy" (*Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 1980, p. 251, n. 3), but acknowledged, in another footnote, that Bücher had "recognized these economic phenomena [the gift exchange] but underestimated their significance by reducing them to hospitality" (*Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 1980, p. 266, n. 1). The last time Mauss mentioned Bücher was in 1934, again in passing, but this time in a discussion on the discipline induced by "the rhythmization of work (Bücher), walk, fight, dance and song" (*Ruvres*, 1969, vol. 3, p. 325, my trans.). Unless I am mistaken, this is all there is.

I will present in another chapter Mauss' rhythmological contribution before WW1 but some notable differences with Bücher's can already be noticed. Whereas the latter was first interested in the rhythm of collective labor, whether as means of sequencing bodily movements or song words and tones, Mauss used the concept of rhythm to denote the calendar of social gatherings in the *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology* (1905), or, quite remarkably, the larger organization of speech in *Outlines of a General Theory of Magic* (1904). As Malinowski who discovered by himself the phatic function of language, which broke with the primacy of the age-old referential model, Mauss was very careful to describe prayer, ritual and magic formula as *language activities*. In other words, while Bücher, who ignored the most recent progress in poetics and linguistics, still relied entirely on the Platonic metric paradigm, Mauss, although he still referred in some instances to the dominant model, introduced, thanks to his dedication to ethnographic methodology, new concerns for speech and pragmatic effects, which enabled him to recover some *rhuthmic* insights previously developed by poets and writers and finally contribute to the reemerging Aristotelian trend.

## Rhythm and Non-Market Economics (Bücher - 1918)

Although the connection could seem at first quite remote, the rhythmological perspective helps also to understand the limits of Bücher's contribution to non-market economics which was to be fully developed by Mauss after the war. We remember that Bücher made as soon as 1893 several mentions of *Bittarbeit* - neighborly help, i.e. of labor offered for free by a group to neighbors in case of an urgent need and in expectation of a future return. He also frequently mentioned loan, gift, and hospitality. Many years later, he expanded his ideas on the subject in an article entitled "*Schenkung, Leihe und Bittarbeit - Gift, Loan, and Neighborly Help*" (1918). Bücher is therefore sometimes credited of being "one of the founders of non-market economics," that is, based on gift exchange instead of market (*Wikipedia*, "Karl Bücher").

However, Harry Liebersohn has recently shown that this judgment was grossly exaggerated. Before WW1, Bücher's stood indeed for a developmental view of the gift which fitted the historicist and evolutionist perspective that was commonly held in the second half of the 19th century. Consequently, he still considered the gift as an undeveloped way to trade freely. Loan, gift, and hospitality were put in line with barter, theft, war, and monetary penalty as possible origins of trade. Neighborly help was mentioned only because it provided the opportunity of working in common and, therefore, of performing rhythmic movements and songs. Only in 1918 Bücher did recognize the compulsory aspect of the gift and its power to produce solidarity, which he started to oppose to the dissolving consequences of the market economy. (Liebersohn, 2011 - for another sensitive account of Bücher's actual very limited contribution, see Wagner-Hasel, 2014)

A huge gap actually separated his perspective from those developed, only a few years later, by the actual founders internationally recognized as such of non-market economics Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), respectively in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques - The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1923-1924).

Bücher, Malinowski, and Mauss had seemingly the same adversaries. Bücher was affiliated to the German Historical school of national economy, which aimed at deconstructing the universal applicability of Adam Smith's liberal theory. After receiving a PhD from the University of Kraków in 1908, Malinowski went the next year to the University of Leipzig, where he studied under Wilhelm Wundt and Karl Bücher himself. From 1910, he attended the London School of Economics, which had been founded in 1895 by Fabian Society members, a British socialist organization. Mauss, for his part, belonged to the French Durkeimian school of sociology, which promoted a holistic conception of society opposed to the individualist perspective of traditional political philosophy as well as the new trend of methodological individualism advocated by the German school of sociology.

But whereas Bücher still elaborated his view in the speculative and evolutionist fashion which had dominated the second half of the 19th century, Malinowski began between 1910 and 1914 to analyze patterns of exchange in Aboriginal Australia through ethnographic documents under the supervision of the field-anthropologist Charles Seligman (1873-1940), a specialist of the Vedda of Sri Lanka and the Shilluk of the Sudan, and the Finnish philosopher and sociologist Edvard Westermarck (1862-1939), a specialist of exogamy and incest taboo. Similarly, from the 1900s, Mauss preferably used the field-studies which began to multiply. In 1897 Franz Boas (1858-1942) had just organized the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, a five-year-long field-study of the natives of the Pacific Northwest which had resulted from 1898 in a bunch of publications that were to feed Mauss' reflection up to his essay on the gift and beyond. For Malinowski as well as for Mauss, the place of an institution in the evolutionary sequence explained nothing and did not justify anything either.

Moreover, whereas Bücher's approach to the gift, at least until 1918, still stuck to a liberal progressive thinking founded on a stage-theory culminating in modern market economy, Malinowski, based on the fieldwork he conducted

during WW1 in Papua and his discovery of the Kula exchange ring, proved that the apparently random gift-giving was in fact a key political process by which non-state political leadership spanning a vast archipelago was established. The "savages" had indeed no state and no market economy but they were certainly not lacking organization or living in a "near state of nature" which would put them in an inferior position respectively to the "civilized" peoples. Capitalizing both on Boas' and Malinowski's fieldworks, Mauss developed his own theory of a gift-economy or non-profit-oriented exchange as a radical critique and alternative to modern capitalism. He proposed an enlarged concept of gift-exchange that entirely subverted the "rationalism," "mercantilism," and "individualism" of modern capitalism as he called them at the end of his essay.

Politically speaking, this resulted in very different positions. Whereas Bücher ranked cultures by their "level" on the evolutionary ladder, justified European colonialism, and remained, as European societies were concerned, a plain liberal hoping that the state, led by benevolent intellectuals, could implement the necessary reform policies, Malinowski rejected any evolutionist ranking of human societies, and was a committed supporter of "indirect rule" in the colonies, as well as for modern societies under the League of Nations (Gellner, 1987). Mauss, for his part, was a devoted socialist, writing number of articles in Jaurès' newspaper *L'Humanité*, criticizing European colonialism, and calling for a radical transformation of society based on the principles of association and solidarity.

If we compare now Bücher's to Mauss' contributions to non-market economics in relation with their respective views on rhythm, we will soon realize that their ethical and political differences were again strictly correlated with their different ways to treat the latter. While Bücher envisaged a very limited relationship between non-market economics and rhythm, the latter only being the general form of the work accomplished in common and the former remaining within the liberal frame, Mauss put an increasing emphasis on it, enlarged it slowly into a non-metric operator, set it in the 1920s as the basis of a general anthropology connecting physiology, sociology, and psychology, and finally placed it at the beginning of the 1930s at the center of a revolutionary theory of social cohesion and power (see below chap. 16 and Michon, 2015b, chap. 6, conclusion).

\*

Although Bücher did certainly not promote a reactionary view, the liberal ethics and politics which accompanied his evolutionary view of work rhythms remained endowed with considerable ambiguity and fragility.

1. Socially speaking, the rhythmic program he outlined fitted quite well the liberal expectations of an educated middle class whose social status and existence was under considerable stress since the last decade of the 19th century. It proposed a cultural critique of the second wave of industrialization and capitalist development which charted a "third way" between reaction and revolution. But it fell short of calling for real social transformation and its ineffectiveness was soon to be recognized in the light of the accelerated industrialization, urbanization, mechanization, and rationalization of work and life that occurred precisely during the last two decades before WW1.

2. The theoretical inconsistency was no less significant. On the one hand, Bücher developed a critique of the capitalism and its utilitarian ethics, he promoted the values of solidarity and reciprocity, he suggested the benefits which could be gained from the rapprochement between work and art. But on the other hand, he totally failed to take into account the latest artistic, poetic and linguistic developments, which had already broken away from the Platonic model, and remained, for his part, faithful until the end to the metric paradigm and its dubious ethics.

3. These ambiguities and frailties explain both the remarkable success and the growing criticism which Bücher's work encountered during the first decades of the 20th century. As we will see in another volume, whereas *Arbeit und Rhythmus* was before WW1 mainly appropriated by liberal life reformers, pedagogues, and dancers such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), Wolf Dohn (1878-1914), or the young Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958), which found in it a liberating educational and artistic frame, it was after 1918 turned upside down by right-wing essayists,

## Rhythm as Ethical and Political Principle (part 2)

---

pedagogues, and artists, such as the gymnast Rudolf Bode (1881-1971), the mature Rudolf von Laban, or the dancer Mary Wigman (1886-1973), who became very early member of the NSDAP as Bode, or eventually more or less opportunistic supporters of the Nazi regime as Laban and Wigman. All of them had been trained in the Jaques-Dalcroze's school before the war and had admired Bücher's book but they now rejected its rationalistic background and preferred Ludwig Klages' (1872-1956) vitalist philosophy of rhythm which fitted better their expressionist and anti-metric concerns.

[Next chapter](#)