

Rhythm as Form of Power in Archaic and Ancient Societies (part 1)

Thursday 22 February 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Rhythmic Solidarity in Polysegmentary Societies (Mauss - 1932)

In 1932, in a famous article entitled “La cohésion sociale dans les sociétés polysegmentaires - Social cohesion in polysegmentary societies,” Mauss addressed, in the very first study specifically devoted to it, the question of “authority and social cohesion” in “archaic” societies. Whereas our modern societies are fairly unified and organized around a state, archaic societies were “polysegmentary,” that is to say composed of clans or tribal segments, which, while being independent of one another and not subservient to any supreme authority, maintained a sufficient solidarity to consider themselves, in certain situations, as belonging to the same social body.

Mauss provided a list of “divisions” that organized this type of societies. Even in the simplest ones like the Australian two-segment societies, there was, first of all, a division by clans or phratries. Each one of them had an independent organic life, but they constituted together a unitary social group, bound by a system of “total prestations” and sometimes by exogamic rules. These clans could themselves be divided into small local groups, in turn divided into a few families. In addition, there were divisions by sex, age (individuals initiated together and forming a brotherhood) and generation, who came to intersect with the former. In the tribe (Mauss used the term to denote the whole containing the segments), there was community and equality within each age group, but in the clan and in the family which were included in the tribe, a solidarity existed in each generation. Likewise, each sex was divided by generation. In these societies, therefore, social cohesion, did not rest, like in ours, on a state apparatus and a system of law, but on a complex interweaving of divisions creating multiple communities of belonging. A photograph of this type of social system would have shown something comparable to a weaving or better to an association of “cohesions” and “oppositions.”

This curious cohesion is realized by adherence and opposition, by friction as in the manufacturing of fabrics or basketry. [...] This is about cutting in different directions a single mass of men and women [...] Oppositions cross cohesions. (“La cohésion sociale dans les sociétés polysegmentaires,” 1932, p. 17-19, my trans.)

Unfortunately, only this first stratum in Mauss’ argumentation was retained by his Structuralist followers [1]. According to them, Mauss, as Evans-Pritchard a few years later, had shown that a social system was a set of *differential relations*, a superposition of *associations* and *divisions*, in other words a “structure.”

This interpretation was actually very reductive and cut off the whole Maussian research from its historical dimension. In addition to explicitly rejecting the term “structure”—as Saussure and I think for the same reasons—Mauss considered such a conception of the social system to be quite insufficient to account for the movement and life of society. To this combinatorial and still almost “photographic” vision of social “anatomy,” we must add, he said, a study of its “physiology”: “After having dissected its composition, we can study its life, its physiology, its psychology, and finally the result.” (M. Mauss, “Fragment d’un plan de sociologie générale descriptive” (1934), *Œuvres*, t. III, 1969, p. 324, my trans.)

This movement of thought was quite comparable to that accomplished a few years before by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale - Course in General Linguistics* (1916) when he reinserted his first description of the language in the “passage of time.”

If time is left out [*en dehors de la durée*], the linguistic facts are incomplete and no conclusion is possible. [...] To represent the actual facts, we must then add to our first drawing a sign to indicate [the] passage of time. (F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (1916), p. 78, trans. Wade Baskin)

Mauss and Evans-Pritchard have suffered at the hands of the Structuralists the same dehistoricizing reduction as Saussure. We must therefore overcome this reduction in order to rid the various reflections on the ways of flowing developed during the first half of the 20th century of their structural spatialization.

It is quite remarkable that Mauss conceptualized this “physiological” or “dynamic” perspective from the notion of rhythm. He wanted to observe the totality of the social system in motion, through the rhythmic movements that animated it.

We are concerned with “wholes,” with systems in their entirety. We have not described them as if they were fixed, in a static or skeletal [*cadavérique*] condition, and still less have we dissected them into the rules and myths and values and so on of which they are composed. It is only by considering them as wholes that we have been able to see their essence, their operation [*le mouvement du tout*] and their living aspect, and to catch the fleeting moment when the society [is forming] [*la société prend*] and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards others. Only by making such concrete observation of social life is it possible to come upon facts such as those which our study is beginning to reveal. Nothing in our opinion is more urgent or promising than research into “total” social phenomena. (*The Gift*, 1924, p. 77, trans. Ian Cunnison, my mod.)

Observing a society from a physiological viewpoint meant to describe the rhythms of the singular and collective individuation processes. In fact, a social system was not so much a complex web of intersecting divisions as a continuous *weaving process* following the temporal rhythm of sociality and exchanges during which “adherences” and “divisions” were alternately loosened and tightened.

While rightly insisting on the fact that groups do not substantially exist by themselves but by opposition to each other within a social system, Structuralists have in turn substantialized these differential relations (attributing them, for example after Levi-Strauss, to “real” anthropological structures), whereas the latter do not exist *per se* but only through their rhythmic actualizations in the course of exchanges and conflicts. Mauss, however, did not make this mistake and explicitly associated divisions and actual prestations.

Thus all groups fit into each other, organize themselves according to each other by reciprocal services, by entanglements of generations, sexes, clans and by stratifications of ages. (“La cohésion sociale dans les sociétés polysegmentaires,” 1932, p. 20, my trans.)

The fundamental temporality of social systems, without which they could not merely exist, explained the importance for Mauss of “total phenomena” like the *potlatch*, which constituted the high points in the rhythms of exchanges and antagonisms, i.e. what he called “sociality.”

Hence, Mauss linked the absence, in polysegmentary societies, of any coercive institution and the non-differentiation of a political sphere to their dynamics of fusion and division, antagonisms and exchanges, which both continuously unraveled and rebuilt these social groups. *In archaic societies, politics did not express itself through a centralized and superior power, nor through the structure of social relations, but through the rhythmic movement of singular and collective individuation.*

Law, morality, religion (in clan, secret societies, etc.) impose rhythm and uniformity within the subgroups, rhythm and unity of movement and spirit among all subgroups. (M. Mauss “Une catégorie de l’esprit humain. La notion de personne. Celle de ‘moi’ - A Category of the Human Mind: the Notion of Person; the Notion of Self,” (1938), trans. W. D. Halls, p. 7, my mod.)

The fundamental discipline or cohesion of a social whole was realized, regenerated and perpetuated thanks to the rhythms that organized antagonisms and exchanges inside and outside the group.

[Next chapter](#)

Footnotes

[1] C. Lévi-Strauss, « Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss », in M. Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris, PUF, 1950 ; L. Dumont, « Marcel Mauss : une science en devenir. » (1972), *Essais sur l’individualisme. Une perspective sur l’idéologie moderne*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1983, p. 167. Idem in his « Préface » to E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Les Nuer...*, *op. cit.*, p. I-XVIII.