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THE ETHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION: ON MARCEL MAUSS*

HENNING RITTER

Alors que tout est en nuances... (Marcel Mauss)

In 1950, when a collection of studies entitled Sociology and Anthropology appeared in France, edited by the sociologist Georges Gurvitch and with an introduction by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (who ten years later achieved fame as a structuralist), the name of its author, Marcel Mauss, was certainly generally well-known in sociological and ethnological academic circles. Yet it is equally certain that scarcely anyone outside the closest circle of his faculty colleagues had ever taken note of a publication by him, and that of these only few held a true picture of the quality and extent of his work. Nor was that at all possible at the time. For his only book was some decades previous, a collection of essays on the history of religion published in collaboration with Henri Hubert (Mélanges d'histoire des religions, 1909). A second book, a manual of ethnography, which appeared in 1947, consists of lecture notes taken and edited by one of Mauss' students, Denise Paulme, of lectures on descriptive ethnography which Mauss had given at the Institut d'Ethnologie between 1926 and 1939. Both books represent two important phases in Mauss' research: the history or rather sociology of religion emanating from the circle which Emile Durkheim had assembled around the periodical L'Année sociologique, and ethnological research emancipated from the discipline and style of argument of the Durkheim school, with which Mauss firmly moulded the first generation of French ethnologists. Certainly two important elements in the life's work of Marcel Mauss; yet, in relation to the dimensions of the subjects he dealt with, and which are visible for the first time in

*Translated from the German by John Burns.
the collections of essays mentioned, only a modest sample. When in 1968/69 a three volume edition of the *Oeuvres* of Marcel Mauss appeared, consisting of about 1500 pages in a systematically ordered presentation by Victor Karady, an overview of Mauss' complete output was made possible as it had been outlined in 1950 by Lévi-Strauss in his "Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss," using incomplete and uncertain textual sources.

This note on the editorial history does not of itself constitute anything unusual. That a scholar's work reveals itself in research which remains fragmentary, in book reviews, in essays buried in scientific periodicals, in orally transmitted hints and stimuli: all this belongs especially to the day to day routine of scientifically productive disciplines. The misreading of the consequences of certain lines of inquiry and of answers developed in detail is, as an indication of the resistance and sluggishness of established explanation and interpretation—a natural element, as it were, of the process of acquiring knowledge. As Mauss himself pointed out on one occasion:

> It is not always necessary to say everything one thinks and it is by no means a sign of a lack of candour to keep necessary, useful and interesting working hypotheses for oneself, for research, at best for teaching and for one's friends...¹

One cannot suppose such sentiments to express the lazy esoteric attitude of routine institutional research when they are seen in the light of Mauss' comment on the pathos of knowledge within modern ethnology and anthropology:

> Each day which passes without one's collecting these fragments of humanity is a day lost for the sciences of society, for the history of man and the unearthing of facts of which no one at this moment can say at what point they will find their use for philosophy and the consciousness which humanity is gaining of itself.²

This pathos-laden programme of what Lévi-Strauss calls "the extension of reason" represents in Mauss' work a remarkable combination of esoteric patterns of research with scientific routine tasks. There is no work by Mauss in which he validly formulates his theoretical perspective. The majority of his writings take the form of reviews, the expression of an opinion on a concrete detail, notes, sketches, which though programmatic, yet always deal with current thinking on a specific problem. Even
Mauss' independent scientific writings contain lengthy passages resembling more the review than the essay. The outward impression made by his ethnological writings, as for example the study on *Seasonal Change in Eskimo Societies* or on *The Gift*, is reminiscent more of a philological treatise than an ethnographical description and analysis. The text is often overburdened by an apparatus of references, source criticism and "additional" notes which repulse the reader like the devotions of a religious order, binding the thought into a mesh of factual requirements from which it is hard to free it.

It is, then, surprising that Lévi-Strauss sees already present in these fragments of a work the elements of the "novum organum" of the social sciences in the 20th century. He does not fail to recognize that, for example, in Mauss' main work, *The Gift*, we are presented with something like a "rough note-book," "pages in no order" full of "impressionistic notes." But Lévi-Strauss also sees in them inspired scholarship,

which in a seemingly random way draws on American, Indian, Celtic, Greek and Oceanic evidence, always equally convincing. Scarcely anyone has been able to read *The Gift* without experiencing the whole scale of emotions which Malebranche remembering his reading Descartes for the first time described so well: with beating heart and head pounding a still indefinable but indisputable certainty that one is present at an event decisive for the development of science grips the mind.³

One may pause here a moment to ascertain the nature of what we are dealing with here. In the introductory remarks to his essay on Bachofen, Walter Benjamin speaks of "scientific prophecies" which are distinguishable from scientific predictions. They deserve to be denoted as such

because a more or less keen sense of what is coming promotes research which in itself in no way leaves the general framework of science. That is why these prophecies lie dormant in special studies, which remain concealed from the general public, and the authors of which in the majority scarcely appear in the role of forerunners either in their own eyes or in those of posterity.⁴

How do such scientific prophecies reveal themselves, presented as they are not in prognostic statements, but as well-rehearsed scientific discourse? They are probably only recognizable in the light of more general changes in perception and attitude which they seem to anticipate without directly having influenced these
changes. As an example from within the experiential horizon of his generation Benjamin cites the studies by two Viennese art historians, Alois Ringl’s *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* and Franz Wickhoff’s *Wiener Genesis*, which, without transcending the boundary of their science, anticipated what later emerged as expressionism. Viewed retrospectively, different forms of expression, scientific and artistic, may combine as elements in a common intellectual climate, without the similarities becoming apparent except at a historical distance. This phenomenon, which is generally familiar to the history of art as epochal style and the signature of the age, also concerns today the history of science under the rubric “the origin of the new.”

A special case of this general problem which is at present being given greater attention is the constellation of a scientific work and interpretation claiming for itself legitimacy as a precursor, in order by this reference to anchor an innovative theoretical conception in the tradition of a discipline. Most scientific disciplines know this through authors and texts which, collected, codified, and guaranteed a presence through interpretation, and are accorded high status as basic coordinates of the disciplines’ theoretical work. The remarkable thing about them is, as Michel Foucault has put it,

that they are not just the authors of their works, their books. They have created more: the possibility and the constitutive laws for other texts. The emphasis here is upon *other texts*, and, in a certain sense, the work of such authors excels that which follows, even if they are thus “outdated.”

In our conception of Mauss’ work, and in its discovery by Lévi-Strauss under the sign of incipient structuralism, we are clearly dealing with both cases: a legitimizing reference to the past and also a distanced analysis of the origin of the new. The real work of the author is the foundation of another work, which, still undefined, is just beginning to show through. The beginning of Mauss’ real work may be sought within a research programme with which Emile Durkheim undertook to develop into a scientific discipline the sociology for which he had provided a methodology. Durkheim’s undertaking rejects the numerous attempts at defining a method for sociology since the end of the 19th century by means of the adoption of questions and material insights from
other disciplines and their application to specifically sociological problems. The work of Durkheim and his school is, however, an example of the risks which such a rejection entails: the danger lies in allowing topics which distract from the original object of study to become the "center of gravity" of one's research. Thus it has rightly been said of the Durkheim school that it took as starting point the problems of contemporary society, yet ended up by not dealing with them at all. What is meant is that within the sociology of Durkheim and his school, from a certain point on, the question of the history of religion and what were at the time called primitive societies are accorded prime attention. Of Durkheim himself it is known that the problem of the sociology of religion became evident to him only after his early main works on the division of labour in society and the rules of sociological method, and it was only after the appearance of his third main sociological work, the study on suicide, that this new interest began to make its scientific mark.

It was not until 1895 that I gained a clear insight into the essential role which religion plays in social life. In that year I found for the first time the means for a sociological treatment of religion. This was a revelation to me. The lectures of 1895 [on religion] denote a hiatus in the development of my thought, and of such a kind that all my earlier research had to be taken up again, in order to bring it into line with the new insights. [This re-orientation] resulted entirely in the studies on the history of religion which I had just undertaken...6

One might even speak of an infection of all the questions of the social theory of the present by the problem of religion. This is all the more surprising as Durkheim himself adopted a strictly lay point-of-view and proceeded from an assumed weakening of the religious factor in the course of modern social development. Without his revising these convictions, the subject of religion becomes of central sociological interest and determines the formulation of the main problems in Durkheim's sociology. How is this possible? The decisive prerequisite for this re-orientation is the conviction that a radical sociologizing of the problem of religion can be achieved through the analysis of the relationship of religion and society in so-called primitive societies, and that, in these, religion is the manifestation of collective consciousness, the theoretical and practical definition of which in the present is the task of science. On the one hand, this includes a genetic thesis as to

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the origin of modern secular institutions, patterns of thought and action. Durkheim formulates this aspect clearly:

Religion contains from the very beginning, though in a confused state, all the elements which, by dissociating themselves in a thousand or more ways, have given rise to all the various manifestations of the collective life. From myth and legend arose science and poetry; from religious ornamentation and cult-ceremonies stem the fine arts; law and morals are born of ritual practices. 7

Durkheim sees a similar origin for philosophical ideas, kinship-ties, punishment, contracts and gifts; only in the case of economic organization does he make a provisional restriction.

The genetic thesis is complemented, on the other hand, by the question which characterizes Durkheim's sociology from the beginning: how can the power which society exercises over the individual consciousness be explained and how may it be justified? Durkheim tries to solve this problem which the crisis of contemporary society poses by pursuing the social origin of religion, which, at an early stage in the development of society, provided a binding solution to this very problem in a form which does not of course appear adequate to the scientific mind of the modern world.

To comprehend the social phenomena of today to the extent necessary to direct their further development, is it not sufficient to observe them as they occur in our present experience? . . . This swift process is, however, riddled with deception. One does not know social reality if one has only viewed it from the outside and without knowing what underlies it. To know how it is made up, one must know how it was formed. . . . To be able to say with some hope of success what will be and what the society of tomorrow will be like, it is essential to examine first the social forms of the most distant past. To understand the present one must leave it.

The answers which Durkheim found in this roundabout way have up to this day weighed heavily on the research which he thus inaugurated. In the summation of his sociology, the study on the Elementary Forms of Religious Life, he arrives at the alienating conclusion that, in all forms of expression of the religious life, society itself presents itself to the individual in its "sanctity" and that this capacity of society for self-deification might possibly be a source of moral renewal for modern society. This was objected to as metaphysics and, later, in the light of fascism, as a subservience to authority and naive trust in the collective being levelled at him
and his school. Raymond Aron and Theodor W. Adorno have argued thus.

When this reproach of spiritual affinity to fascism was first made in the thirties, twenty years after Durkheim's death in 1917, Marcel Mauss replied as follows:

Durkheim, and, after him, the remainder of our circle were those who, I believe, developed the theory of the authority of the collective imagination. Something which we did not really foresee was that many large modern societies which more or less emerged from the Middle Ages could be hypnotized just like the Australians in their dances. (...) This return to the primitive was not part of our intention. We restricted ourselves to hints at mass situations, whereas, in reality, it was a question of something else. We restricted ourselves, too, to showing that the individual can find the basis and support for his freedom, his independence, his personality and his criticism in the spirit of the collective. Basically, we did not make allowance for the extraordinary new possibilities (...). I believe that all this is a genuine tragedy for us, a too powerful coming true of things which we had referred to, and the proof that we should have expected their coming true in evil rather than in good.8

What this return to the primitive in the research directions in the Durkheim circle implies only becomes clear in these last judgments which Durkheim believed he could justifiably make on the basis of his research in the sociology of religion. Marcel Mauss is a reliable witness to the movement which he helped initiate and to this heritage of which he continued to administer after Durkheim's death. How close he was to Durkheim is apparent from his biography. He was Durkheim's nephew, fourteen years younger than him, born in 1872 in the same locality in the Vosges, and it seems right to assume that his break with the tradition of a pious Jewish family boasting several rabbis did not come about without the influence of his uncle, who began to teach pedagogy and sociology in Bordeaux in the eighties. Mauss studied philosophy in Bordeaux under Durkheim's supervision before turning to the history of religion, Indology and other philological disciplines. The combination of historical, philological and ethnological interests made Mauss supremely suited to collaborate on the periodical Année Sociologique with which Durkheim strived to provide an annual assessment of sociologically relevant material from neighbouring disciplines, especially the historical sciences, and a critical assessment of internationally
rivaling sociological and social-philosophical theories in a closer sense. From the very beginning, the aim was to extend the object of study of sociology, or, expressed differently, to sociologize the neighbouring disciplines.

The most important result of this programme may be termed an “ethnological revolution” within the sociology of the Durkheim school. Lévi-Strauss has pointed out that in *The Rules of Sociological Methods*, Durkheim is still mistrustful of ethnographic literature, the “confused and fleeting observations” of which he regards as inferior to the “precise texts of history.” And Mauss, too, and his colleague, Hubert, adopt this judgment in their study of the sacrifice when they regard the facts assembled by ethnographers as being distorted by fleeting observations and falsified by being translated into the “exactness of our language.” Yet they are not led to devalue these documents, but to change their way of viewing them; historical and ethnographical sources are not to be used to illustrate a development schema and a genesis of the sacrifice, but should enable the schema, or, as we should probably say today, the structure of the institution of sacrifice to be recognized. Ethnological and historical sources are here of equal value. The new methodological conviction which emerges from the revaluation of the relationship of ethnography and history is summed up by Durkheim in a revision of his own earlier judgment:

Nothing, then, is more unjust than the disdain with which all too many historians still treat the work of ethnographers. The opposite has in fact proved to be true: that ethnography has most frequently led to the most fruitful revolutions in the various branches of sociology.

Primitive civilizations for Durkheim and his circle became “privileged cases, because they are simple cases.” One may justifiably ask if this supposed simplicity is not a deception to be attributed rather to the change in the observer’s perspective than to properties of primitive societies. They are, as Lévi-Strauss stresses in an appraisal of Durkheim’s contribution to ethnology, no longer object of a quaint curiosity which feels attracted to the strangeness and bizarre nature of its discoveries, nor do they provide more examples for speculative hypotheses on the origin and development of mankind. Inner-theoretical motifs in Durkheimian sociology—especially its interest in the sociological de-
termining of the function of religion—shed new light on the ethnographical facts. They now become elements in a type of experimental set-up for an analysis of elementary social, functional relationships, and, as such, acquire a new authenticity. In addition, the new ethnographical literature which is now taken note of can, in its empirical abundance, no longer be fitted coherently into simple schemas of stages and sub-stages of social evolution. The re-orientation thus necessitated is expressed more freely in Mauss' work than in that of Durkheim himself, whose conception of logical simplicity remains determined by developmental-historical thinking; it is, as it were, its logical distillation. Mauss, on the other hand, declares as early as 1902 on accepting the chair of “the history of the religion of non-civilized peoples” that there are no non-civilized people, only people of “different” civilizations, and that the religious phenomena observed by ethnologists in Australia are neither simple nor primitive. Only later do the implications of this outline come to fruition in Mauss' own work, in his sketch of a theory of civilization, in which he supports the very modern view that every civilization chose from a pool of different possibilities, or in the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, which regards itself as a theory of civilisational difference.

The ethnological revolution shows itself in sociology but sketchily at first. It is not a turning towards genuine ethnography as introduced by Malinowski with his demand for full participation in the life and thought of natives, but it presents itself as the introduction of direct observation in the relationship of problems with a high degree of abstraction and factual data and of extremely indirect provenance. The observation and description demanded and practised by Mauss is that of a theoretician in search of an authentic reality of just those social experiences which are intangible and of conceptual images which are hard to grasp.

Even where Mauss comes closest to a genuine ethnographical description of a concrete society, as in his essay on Seasonal Change in Eskimo Societies, he does so in the mode of the “as if.” It is an ethnography of ethnographies. The entire literature on Eskimos available to Mauss in 1904 is, as it were, layered into a model of what in the Durkheim school goes under the newly-coined term of “social morphology,” namely:
the material substrate of societies (…), that is, the form which they assume when they settle in a territory, the size and density of the population, the way in which it is distributed, and also the ensemble of things in which the collective life is situated.⁹

What Mauss discovers in his description of Eskimo societies according to these criteria is the fact of a double morphology of life in the winter quarters and the summer encampments which is not only an expression of external requirements and needs, but in which something like a general rhythm of social life is represented. Mauss finds that

the people group themselves in two different ways, and that to these group forms correspond two legal systems, two moralities and two types of household and of religious life. Opposed to a real community of ideas and interests existing in the close conglomeration of the winter, and a strong religious, moral and spiritual unity, are the isolation, fragile social relationships and an extreme moral and religious impoverishment in the summer dispersal.¹⁰

The pathos of intensive observation of this case of a double morphology brought about by many conditions of an external nature is discernibly determined by “what is happening around us in our western societies” without its there attainning the degree of crystallization in the observer’s field. Is not life in these societies equally subject to rhythmic fluctuations, the diversion of the summer in the holidays after which

life [tries] to pick itself up again and with ascending motion [continues] regularly until June only to collapse into itself one more …" 

and is it not a general law that social life does not remain at the same pitch during different seasons of the year

but (…) [goes through] regularly consecutive phases of waxing and waning intensity of rest and activity, of exhaustion and recuperation?¹²

Hand in hand with the peaceful observation of the model case of Eskimo societies goes a disquiet, hard to define, stemming from the social experience of the observer caught up in the tension of collective compulsions and an individual need to withdraw, and simultaneously in the tension of individual isolation and the need for the excesses of collective life. This opposition, not to speak of ambivalence, is characteristic of all the theoretical efforts of the sociology of the Durkheim school and has given rise to endless
discussions of individualism and collectivism. Yet one will hardly find another sentence which expresses this in so untroubled and sober a way as the following occasional remark in Mauss' essay on Eskimo societies:

One may say that social life exercises a power over the organism and the consciousness of the individual which they can only bear for a certain length of time, and that a point comes to where they are forced to slow it down and partially to withdraw from it.\(^{13}\)

The ethnological observation practised by Mauss passes through several layers of the given data. First it is directed at what—in the case of magic practices and sacrificial rituals—may be obtained from authentic documents, ideally from eye-witness testimony (the authors of which are themselves agents), from events, sequences of activity, and things accessible to simple description. In and through this description an attempt is made to grasp a second level, which Mauss in his analysis of the sacrifice as a unified sacrificial system defines as the binding mechanism relating things, ideas and actions to each other. The description of the sacrifice and of magic in their typical milieu, practices and structures is, however, always also the attempt at a description of something else. In his *Outline of a General Theory of Magic* Mauss defines the real object of research as the description of what cannot be clearly conceived of:

ideas from which we thought ourselves freed and which consequently we can imagine only with difficulty (...) dark and blurred and yet strangely enough clearly defined in their use (...) abstract and general and yet full of the concrete. Their original, that is to say their complex and confused nature, forbids us carrying out a logical analysis. We must restrict ourselves to describing them.\(^{14}\)

This description, or an uncertain attempt at it, is admittedly undertaken in the expectation of progressing to a different logic or to a non-intellectual or individualistic psychology which can explain and integrate operations otherwise difficult to grasp. The concrete ethnological observations of the Durkheim school proceed very rapidly to factors which it regards as lying deeper than that which is accessible to introspective reflection. Mauss speaks very early on of unconscious ideas being determinant in magic, religion and linguistics. References such as these remain, however, in Mauss' work tentative efforts to extricate himself from
sociological explanatory schemas of Durkheimian provenance. Resorting to the collective consciousness as the real agent in all those forms of expression of social life which appear overpowerful as opposed to the individual and the modes of thought and activity which he can readily comprehend is clearly noticeable here as inhibiting the search for other forms of explanation.

The situation brought about by the ethnological revolution is not without paradoxical features. It had been made possible at a point in time when it began to be supposed that religion, which orders all things and processes into sacred and profane, could be completely explained as a projection of the social. Should not, then, so-called primitive societies be regarded as simple models for the mechanism of the social, which, in however fantastic and, for the modern individual consciousness, unintelligible, form, is freely revealed as working continuously in such societies? Thus, it was often rightly said within the circle of Durkheim's supporters that primitive societies were the paradise of the collective consciousness where its rule was indisputable and it neither met with nor tolerated resistance. But, via the ethnographical observation of primitive societies, the image of the effective functional relationships present in them was enriched to the extent that the explanation founded on collective consciousness lost its bite, or itself required to be further differentiated. It is at this intersection that Mauss' studies on the history of religion may be situated, and they seem to be, despite the richness of the relationship of ritual forms, myths, religions, ideas and social forms which he makes accessible to description, obstructed by sociological explanation. This can be clearly felt even in expressions which attempt to preserve the identity of the sacred and the social against the complex inter-relatedness of the real and intellectual milieu of religion:

The sacred things are social things ( . . . ) In our opinion everything may be understood as holy which qualifies society for the group and its members. When the gods, each at their appointed hour, leave the temple and become profane, we see human and social things entering one after the other, the fatherland, property, work, the human person ( . . . ). Behind [the idea of the sacred and] the ideas of separation, cleanliness and uncleanness, lie respect, love, rejection, anxiety, various strong, mood-laden emotions, which, by their very nature, insist on being translated into gestures and thoughts. The concept [of the sacred] is more
complex, richer, more general and practical than it first seemed. It is without doubt the *idée-force* around which rites and myths order themselves. It revealed itself to us as the central phenomenon of all religious phenomena. We set ourselves the task of understanding it and of verifying what we have said about the identity of the sacred and the social.

The central phenomenon of the sacred, the unity of an idea and its expressive power (what Mauss, with idiosyncratic terminology, here calls *idée-force*), stands in need of explanation, a demand for explanation which, obscured as it is by Mauss' sociological explanation, cannot be met. For it is able to name only episodic conditions under which idea and expressive force coalesce.

The parallel case of Mauss' theory of magic allows this to be shown more clearly. After describing the logic of magic, which is a logic of desire, replacing reality by wishful thinking, Mauss has the sign create the thing, the part the whole, the word the event, his sociological explanation pointing to collective states in which such violations of the customary rules of logic and individual psychology are possible.

The whole social body is brought to life by a single movement. There are no longer individuals. They are, as it were, parts of a machine, or, even better, the spokes of a wheel, the magical dancing and singing revolutions of which might perhaps be the ideal, original image which even today recurs in the cases we have named, and elsewhere. Its rhythmic, regular and continuous movement is the direct expression of the state of mind in which the consciousness of each individual is overwhelmed by a single feeling, by a single hallucinatory idea, namely that of a common aim. All the bodies vibrate at the same pitch, all faces wear the same mask, and all voices are a single cry, quite apart from the deep impression made by the beat, the music and the song. To see the image of his desire in all phenomenon, to hear from every mouth the proof of its certainty, each individual is without any possible resistance, carried away by the conviction of all. Thrown randomly together in the movement of the dance and in the fever of their excitement, they form but a single body and a single soul. Only then is social body truly realized, for at this moment its cells, the individuals, are perhaps just as little isolated from each other as those of the individual organism. Under such conditions, which are no longer realized in our societies even by the most agitated of our masses, but which can still quite possibly be found elsewhere, the universal consensus creates realities. (...) The laws of collective psychology here violate those of individual psychology. The whole range of phenomena which normally occur consecutively, acts of will, thought, muscular movements, need-satisfaction, thus becomes absolutely simultaneous.
One can easily recognize that here sociological explanation becomes vacuous. What the ethnological revolution had brought of value to sociology, enrichment through the experience of other social forms foreign to our society, and the differentiated operations of their “logic,” is sacrificed in such passages to an overquick, pseudo-sociological explanation. For either primitive societies are, in their non-acutely-agitated, normal state, just rigid, veiled forms of collective madness, or the explanation drawn on here is just as incapable of comprehending their normal state as that of our own society, which, at the time when Mauss wrote this—in the year 1902—believed itself safe from all acute collective madness.

What by description was wrenched from the sphere of disdain, magical operations unintelligible to us, sacrificial acts oscillating between violence and its transcendence, is, in passages like these, thrust back into confusion and incomprehensibility. It is the moment of incantation in sociology itself at which we are present—the incantation of the origin of collective logic and the logic of the social from the agitation of the mass. The agitation of the description, however, is the agitation of the describing sociologist who believes himself present at the genesis of categories which are not further analyzable.

Lévi-Strauss spoke of a “bottleneck” in Mauss’ thinking which he could not negotiate:

like Moses, who led his people to the frontier of the promised land, the splendour of which he himself never saw. There must somewhere be a decisive bottleneck which Mauss has never negotiated and which without doubt can explain why the novum organum of the social sciences of the 20th century which one could have expected from him and all the threads of which he held in his hand never saw the light of day except in the form of fragments.18

The “promised land” into which the structuralist Lévi-Strauss leads the social sciences of the 20th century is the theory of the unconscious and of the logic of the symbolic function of the human mind. In fact, it is a simple turning which Lévi-Strauss gives to Mauss’ insights: if it is not possible to explain sociologically the thought systems and practices described by Mauss other than by resorting to confused, all-embracing affective states, then the sociological explanation itself must be abandoned. Lévi-
Strauss came to this conclusion before his first structural studies on kinship-systems were published, and it may be made plausible even without the new theoretical set of instruments, even if its fruitfulness cannot yet be tested. It is the consequence of the failed attempts of the Durkheim school to explain the genesis of symbolic thought from its social functions, and proceeds instead from the premise that the human potential for using symbols in society is a fact with no further derivation:

Sociology cannot explain the genesis of symbolic thought; it must take it as given. (...) Society cannot exist without symbols [one must] show how the emergence of symbolic thought makes social life at one and the same time both possible and necessary.

There are many passages in Mauss' work which point forward to this position without, however, adopting it. He postulates a "non-intellectual psychology" which enables the European, matured to reason, to understand foreign categories; he sees the common element, the unconscious ideas, at work in magic, religion and linguistics. He notes the linguistic similarity between the social facts which he is studying; and occasionally his thoughts revolve around the concept of the unconscious without, however, naming it. In very difficult, groping terms he tries to determine the relationship of language and society without being able to loosen the knot of enmeshed relations between linguistic and social facts. One must, to a certain extent, follow Mauss' mode of expression in order to recognize the barriers which prevented him from taking the structuralist way out. In the essay on the "Structuring of Sociology" published in 1927 Mauss regards as a weakness of the Durkheim school its neglect of technical, aesthetic and above all linguistic phenomena. For it is in language really that all other utterances and activities of society find expression, and primarily they are transmitted linguistically. In language lie most of the concepts and ordering of the collective, which does not, however, mean that there is nothing in society which does not translate into words; on the contrary, there are categories of thought which without grammatical, logical or any expressive correspondences guide a whole range of actions and ideas, and are, as it were, active in mythology and philosophy, in the technical division of labour, and even in the ordering of things and persons.
Nowhere does Mauss perhaps come closer to Lévi-Strauss; yet he withdraws from this advanced position considering that, even if the social need not necessarily represent itself consciously or verbally, everything verbal is in any case conscious and social. Still more important seems to him the fact that everything verbal has, more strongly than all other collective practices or ideas, the specific quality of isolating even civilization and society by its belonging to a specific community. The linguistic belongs simultaneously to the order of the general and the particular, for it is general for all individuals belonging to the language community, but it is only common to them, and each individual individualizes linguistic expression in his usage. Language is, then, the common and, as it were, natural means by which thought and action are represented. It has, however, at the same time in its individual use the characteristic of the artificial and arbitrary. This dual nature of linguistic expression has for Mauss its roots in the relationship of idea and action within social consciousness, a problem of which he says that no one has previously dared to approach, and the posing of which will not perhaps be possible so soon.

One can only speculate as to how Mauss would have judged the structuralist solution to this problem and whether he would have accepted it at all. At the highest stage of abstraction to which Mauss theoretically attained, he expressly excluded the possibility of a general solution to the problem of the relationship between idea and action, the notion of a common anthropological root of the synthesis which is represented in social institutions and thought systems, and this he does in argument with which, from the perspective of his successors, he is already moving in the midst of structuralism:

There is a deep-lying property common to all social phenomena and appearing even in those which are not only characteristic of a single society but of several societies of greater or lesser number having survived a more or less long time. Every social phenomenon has in fact an essential property: whether it is a symbol, a word, an instrument, an institution, or even language itself or the most developed of sciences, whether it is the instrument best adapted to the best and most purposes, whether it is as reasonable and human as most possible—it is still arbitrary.

All social phenomena are, to a certain degree, the work of the collective will and whoever speaks of the human will means the choice of various possible options. A certain thing, a story, a word, a certain way of cultivating the soil, the inner or outer structure of a house, a vessel, a tool,
everything has a type and a mode of its own and in many cases supplementary to its own nature and primary form, its own mode of use. The social is the sphere of modality.  

In this sphere of modality of the "how" of the concrete expression of social behaviour and of general social forms and functional relationships Mauss has moved as an eminent observer risking error, against which his unbounded curiosity can only defend itself by not pausing. When he divides up civilizations into those in which children are brought up with or without cradles, those in which food is eaten with or without salt, then these are small daring observations, but also marking points left behind during the swift traverse of unknown terrain. If one day—and only in this indeterminacy did Mauss foresee the future of his research—there should be a science of man, then it should take account of such markers, perhaps re-siting them, but in any case achieving such a union of the general and the concrete.

Berlin and Frankfurt

References