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Marcel Fournier: Marcel Mauss

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INTRODUCTION

MARCEL MAUSS is the object of great admiration. Georges Condominas called him “the father of French ethnography.”¹ “The Gift,” required reading for any anthropology student, is his “most deservedly famous” work, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has noted.² It is, in Georges Gurvitch’s words, a “true masterpiece.”³

The intellectual legacy bequeathed by this great scholar, long unappreciated by everyone but anthropologists, is now available to the academic community. *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Sociology and anthropology), a collection of half a dozen of Mauss’s writings, was published in 1950, the year he died. In the late 1960s, Presses Universitaires de France brought out selected works under the title *Mauss*;⁴ and, more important, a three-volume edition of his works was issued by Minuit in those same years.⁵ These editions, however, include only the scholarly works. His many political works, which, as Denis Hollier lamented, were extremely dispersed, have also recently been collected.⁶

In a few sentences, Henri Lévy-Bruhl expresses the essence of what we need to know about a man who was his teacher and friend: “Mauss is known primarily as an ethnologist and a historian of religion”; “Mauss despised all dogmatism”; “Mauss knew everything”; “Mauss was teeming with ideas”; “Mauss was the epitome of dedication”; “Mauss did not leave behind any general overview.” And in only a few lines he retraces Mauss’s “original and attractive physiognomy”: “Physically large and with a good build, his face framed by a light brown beard; regular features; sharp, shining eyes. His conversation was sparkling, though his voice was somewhat hollow and his manner of speaking slow. In his remarks there was often some paradox by which he himself was sometimes taken in.”⁷

Lévy-Bruhl is discreet about Mauss’s personal life: “His was a scholar’s life and displays few prominent traits.”⁸ But he immediately adds: “This is not the place to talk about the man his friends and loved ones will forever mourn for his great kindness, sensitivity, and gentleness. . . . It is fitting to say, however, that his kind-heartedness was to some extent prejudicial to his scholarly output.”⁹ Little is known about the man: a few short biographical accounts are devoted to him but he has never been the object of a true intellectual biography.¹⁰

To write the intellectual biography of a scientist is to focus on his character—a unique set of abilities, habits, temperaments, and physical and mental strengths¹¹—but also to write the history of the people and disciplines associated with him (in this case, the history of religion, ethnology, and sociology). In addition, as Mauss’s former student André-Georges Haudricourt

suggests, it is to grasp the subject's work in its context.¹² Such a project is ambitious, not to say perilous, especially if we wish to be complete. This was the wish Mauss himself formulated when he wrote an obituary for the English anthropologist James Frazer: "A work of art may be merely suggestive. The history of a scientist, however, must be truthful and everything must be said in it."¹³

One's interest in Mauss's life increases as one moves away from the man and toward his environment and his age. The environment was made up of new academic disciplines (ethnology and sociology) and of a school of thought, the Durkheim school; the age was the long period extending from 1872 to 1950 and marked by two major wars. Through his writings, his teachings, and his political action, Mauss found himself at the center of the intellectual and political life of his country and of Europe—in the "witch's cauldron," to use his expression.

One cannot speak of Mauss without mentioning his uncle Émile Durkheim, head of the French school of sociology:¹⁴ Mauss himself acknowledged that it was impossible to separate himself from the work of the school. "If there is any personality, it is submerged in an intentional impersonalism. The sense of work in common, as a team, the conviction that collaboration is a counterforce to isolation, to the pretentious search for originality, may be what characterizes my scientific career."¹⁵

Mauss embodied better than anyone that ethic of research characteristic of all who participated in the great collective adventure of *Année Sociologique*. His entire scientific life was organized around the journal, and most of his large body of writings took the form of notes, notices, and book reviews. Little has been known about the dynamic of the team of young researchers surrounding Durkheim, a group usually portrayed as a cult. Access to Mauss's personal archives, and in particular to his correspondence, now makes it possible to shed light on this founding moment in the history of the human sciences.¹⁶

In observing the exchanges, arguments, and differences of opinion Mauss had with all concerned, we may draw a more accurate portrait of the Durkheim school and present the specific contribution of each of its members. It is true that more than the others, Mauss found himself in a position of dependence, "in Durkheim's shadow," as Condominas writes.¹⁷ His works, particularly his early writings, seem to be an "integral part of the collective work accomplished by the school of sociology."¹⁸ But when we read Mauss's writings as a whole, including the unpublished texts, we are led to qualify that assertion of his orthodoxy: the nephew always called himself a Durkheimian, but he was one in his own way.

Mauss had little interest in developing systematic theories but preferred "to work on his materials," to establish a few valid generalizations, and then "go on to something else."¹⁹ Like Durkheim, Mauss was an ardent defender

of positive science, believing *only in the facts*. He shared an evolutionist conception of history and attributed a heuristic value to the study of the elementary (or primitive) forms of social facts. He applied himself to the analysis of the social functions of institutions and to the study of the mechanisms of social cohesion. And through his work on the ritual manifestations of religious life, he contributed toward a theory of the sacred. He acknowledged that “the innermost fount of social life is a set of representations”; he joined the vast Durkheimian enterprise whose object was to study the “human mentality.”

And yet Mauss cannot be easily confined to a single category. He moved from one discipline to another, took an interest in a host of questions, and, though following in his uncle’s footsteps, also managed cautiously to mark himself off from him. He acknowledged that society is built on solidarity; but he believed that it also requires reciprocity for its survival. And though maintenance of the social order requires consensus, it also depends on the interpenetration of different social groups.

Mauss’s position as nephew, disciple, and successor had one advantage: he was not compelled to lead the major battles, though there was no dearth of adversaries in academia. He could allow himself to open a dialogue with former enemies and attempt compromises, especially with psychologists. He was more interested in furthering knowledge than in defending a doctrine, and his attitude toward science—always both rationalist and empiricist—was less that of a professor who wants to transmit a body of codified knowledge than that of a researcher aware of the limits of his methods who wants to collect new data and reduce ignorance about reality. As he liked to remind us, it is “the unknown that must be unveiled.” Even though Mauss never did fieldwork, he was mindful of reality and familiar with all the ethnological research.

It would be a distortion to see Mauss merely as the heir to the Durkheim legacy. After World War I, the burden of editing the vast and previously unpublished work of Durkheim and his collaborators did fall on his shoulders. But he also pursued his own research in every direction, from the gift of “bodily techniques” to the idea of civilization and the notion of person. And though he relaunched *Année Sociologique* primarily out of a sense of obligation to Durkheim’s memory, the Institut d’Ethnologie, which he helped to found in 1925, was not a specifically Durkheimian enterprise.

There is a great temptation to seek a unifying principle in Mauss’s writings. Victor Karady claims that his work holds together more as a result of “contingent circumstances than as the dialectic of a creative project and its realization.”²⁰ This is a harsh judgment, since it assumes that the realization of a creative project owes nothing to circumstance. Yet it is true Mauss was often sorely tested—by the death of Durkheim and of Henri Hubert and by his own illnesses, for example—and faced many professional and

personal obligations. As a result he left several projects unfinished: a thesis on prayer, a masterwork on the nation, a small book on Bolshevism, a study of technology.

What remains of that life devoted to science and marked by the spirit of the gift? Maurice Leenhardt replies succinctly: “Few books, articles dispersed everywhere, an enormous influence.”²¹ As a teacher, he was dear to his students, but he acted primarily as guide, companion, motivator. He remained a student at heart throughout his life and at the end of his career wanted to become the pupil of his pupils. “Mauss was never a big shot,” notes Jean Cazeneuve. “There was always something young and a little bohemian about him, and even as a teacher he seems to have secretly remained an eternal student.”²²

Marcel Mauss was foremost a scholar, but a scholar who never lost interest in what was happening around him. Unlike his uncle, he was actively engaged in politics from his university days. A member of the Groupe des Étudiants Collectivistes (Collectivist student group), of the Parti Ouvrier Français (French workers party), and of the Parti Ouvrier Socialiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary socialist workers party), he supported Émile Zola during the Dreyfus Affair, was a contributor to *Devenir Social* and *Mouvement Socialiste*, became a reporter for *Humanité*, and published articles in *Populaire* and *Vie Socialiste*. Little is known about the role political activity played in his life, particularly the place of the cooperative and socialist movements he participated in. Mauss could have run for national office. He preferred to remain merely a militant, faithful to his convictions and to his friends but intent on adapting to new realities.

Such political involvement, one suspects, influenced his work: after World War I, Mauss wrote a long series of article on violence, published an important piece entitled “A Sociological Appreciation of Bolshevism,” and began a book on the nation. It was also at that time that he composed “The Gift” for the journal *Année Sociologique*, an essay that attests not only to the research concerns of a specialist in the history of religion and in ethnology but also to the sensibility of a politically engaged intellectual. A sociologist, ethnologist, and Jewish militant committed to socialism, Mauss felt the ambivalence specific to his position and his milieu. His reflections on World War I, the Russian Revolution, the nation, Nazism, and other matters were those of a man who, one way or another, knew how to steer the leftist course through the storm. It is in reading his “Sociological Appreciation of Bolshevism” that we grasp the power of his thought, his capacity to draw immediate political and moral conclusions from one of the twentieth century’s great human tragedies.

At the start of this research, I shared my plan to write Mauss’s intellectual biography with some of my colleagues. Some reactions were positive:

“Now that’s an interesting project, no one’s done it yet!” But those most familiar with the question proved somewhat skeptical. “It won’t be easy,” they warned me.

They were right. Carrying out this project required considerable research and documentation, made possible by the conjunction of several favorable circumstances. I received research grants and invitations to the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (School of higher studies in the social sciences) and to the *Maison des Sciences de l’Homme* (Institution for the human sciences); I benefited from the collaboration of members of the Mauss family and of people who knew Marcel Mauss personally; and I enjoyed the support of Pierre Bourdieu and Maurice Agulhon, professors at the *Collège de France*. I also had access to the Hubert-Mauss collection, a necessary condition for completing this book. The documents the Hubert and Mauss families deposited in the archives of the *Collège de France* constitute a valuable source of information for anyone interested in the history of the French school of sociology. They include correspondence between Durkheim and Mauss, a set of letters received by Mauss, manuscripts (some unpublished), notes on the courses Mauss took and offered, notes on his readings, and various documents relating to *Année Sociologique*, the *Institut Français de Sociologie*, and *Annales Sociologiques*.

Although the letters opened countless avenues, I had to broaden the investigation by examining other archives, by interviewing Mauss’s nephews, niece, and former students, and by taking a complete inventory of his political writings. The support and kindness that were lavished on me by many different people, and in particular by the members of the Mauss family, were not only greatly appreciated but decisive in enabling me to complete the project.

Gradually the figure of the great man faded away, to be replaced by a rich and complex personality, that of a kind-hearted and thoughtful man.²³ That personality is particularly engaging in that, to use Henri Lévy-Bruhl’s expression, it is the “seat” of a series of important historical events and bears the mark of a unique intellectual and social itinerary that would carry Durkheim’s nephew, born into a provincial Jewish family, to the *Collège de France*.

This study follows chronologically the major stages of Mauss’s life and comprises four parts: (I) Durkheim’s Nephew; (II) The Totem and Taboo Clan; (III) The Heir; and (IV) Recognition. The epilogue covers World War II and the postwar years. This book is part of a triptych that also includes the publication (in collaboration with Philippe Besnard) of the correspondence between Durkheim and Mauss²⁴ and of Mauss’s collected political writings.²⁵ It will become clear that in this book I seek to present an overview of Mauss’s writings through an account of his life: in short, a key moment in the

history of the constitution of the human sciences. In this way we may gain a clearer understanding of the scope and breadth of Mauss's influence, which was significant not only on the generation of researchers he trained—Denise Paulme, Louis Dumont, André-Georges Haudricourt, and others—but also on Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Condominas, and Pierre Bourdieu, to mention only a few.