

| Translation |



Marcel Mauss and the new anthropology

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Translated from the Italian by Alice Elliot

Editor's Abstract: "One cannot merely refer to Mauss; with him, one must debate." In this essay, Valerio Valeri takes on precisely this task of critical dialogue with Mauss' work. Valeri characterizes Mauss as having inaugurated a "new anthropology" that breaks decisively with its predecessors. It does so by engaging seriously with the full diversity of human categories and self-understandings, rather than extending European concepts of humanity as a supposed universal standard against which all others are measured. Valeri tracks a unity of method and theory across Mauss' essays on magic, the gift, the person, the body, and death, a unity revolving particularly around the problem of relations between collective and individual psychology. Valeri's article, written in 1966 and informed in part by writings of Lévi-Strauss, is a still-timely synthetic explication of the graceful longevity of Mauss' oeuvre. It also reads as a charter of Valeri's own transition to the vocation of anthropology, from advanced study in philosophy. In the humanistic key of Mauss, Valeri advocates an anthropology adequate to the reality that " 'other' civilizations are other men that are living here and now on this earth, with us: they are not 'primitive societies,' they do not belong to our past, but to our present, and to the common future of humanity that is on the road of rediscovering itself in all its parts."

Keywords: Marcel Mauss, gift, magic, sacrifice, the body, death, the person, humanism, psychology, sociology, anthropology

Everything that has been is eternal: the sea will cast it up again
Friedrich Nietzsche

Editor's note: This essay is a translation of Valerio Valeri's first publication, "Marcel Mauss e la nuova antropologia" appearing in 1966 in the Italian journal *Critica Storica* 2: 677–703. It was written while he was finishing his first PhD in Philosophy at the Scuola Normale, University of Pisa (1968). We are grateful to *Critica Storica* and Janet Hoskins for their kind permission to publish this translation.

“Above all it is essential to draw up the largest possible catalogue of categories; it is essential to start with all those which it is possible to know man has used. It will be clear that there have been and still are dead or pale or obscure moons in the firmament of reason” (Mauss 1979: 32). With this phrase, Marcel Mauss captures the entire meaning and program of anthropology. The phrase has sustained, for more than half a century, his extraordinary and prophetic oeuvre, which becomes increasingly timely as its deepest intention materializes in new discoveries, in the evolution of the science he contributed to establish. So, paradoxically, despite aging, Mauss becomes increasingly “new,” and one is obliged to take a stance, as we are barely at the beginning of the road he has mapped out.

One cannot merely refer to Mauss: with him, one must debate.

The originality of the themes he addresses and the brilliance with which he sketches a solution sets in motion his readers, pushing them forward, beyond the page, so that they cannot but sense him as being both dated and contemporary at the same time, as it is he who pushes beyond himself.

To the page corresponds the man, to his humanism a moral figure, a mental toolkit able to reckon with the whole of humanity. “Mauss knows everything,” his students used to say. But his wasn’t a self-satisfied knowledge, forgetful of how things are always vaster than what they seem. He knew only too well that one cannot build a universe *within* oneself, but only between oneself and others. And that we need to advance as much as possible into the latter kind of universe. Indeed, few have created such an array of tools as Mauss did for relating to mankind. His knowledge of sociology, ethnology, psychology, psychopathology (he was a student of Ribot, and among the first to acknowledge the contribution of psychoanalysis to the explanation of ethnological facts), linguistics, history, and philosophy, his prodigious memory, his extraordinary intellectual curiosity and his ability to arouse that of others, made of him an exceptional scholar and teacher. His students, all of them excellent, bear witness to this: Marcel Griaule, B. Maupoil, Michel Leiris, Denise Paulme, Roger Bastide, Jacques Soustelle, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Henri Lehmann, Alfred Metraux, and Georges Devereux.

The merits of Mauss, however, were more than this. He had a profound knowledge of all aspects of the Classical, Germanic, and Celtic worlds, and was above all a remarkable Indologist. For many years, in fact, he was Professor of the History of Indian Religions and, as Louis Dumont (1964: 90) recalls, he never ceased, even in his later lectures, to attach great importance to the Indian world and the Orient in general.

His interests, however, increasingly moved towards ethnology, and he became Director of the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris in 1925, together with Lévy-Bruhl and Paul Rivet.

Mauss was thus a man for humanity as a whole, a man, that is, who would not settle for living and thinking within the limits of Western culture. It is for this reason, as Lévi-Strauss has highlighted, that his opus has such an “anticipatory” character, with his theories forerunning those of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead and, more generally, the American “culture and personality” school. He also anticipates Cannon in the study of the relationship between the physiological and the social. His rigorous method and his patient empirical research influenced English anthropology: not so long ago Evans-Pritchard (1954: 7) wrote:

We are far from the rigorous discipline which men like Mauss had in mind, a discipline which supposes the specialist study of a lifetime and which, while setting limits to aims and problems, necessitates scholarship which embraces not only a vast range of information about primitive peoples but also the study of the history of religions, of sacred texts, and of exegesis and theology.

In a sense then, because of the extreme breadth of his conceptions, Mauss is still “ahead” of modern anthropology.

Such knowledge, such (thoroughly scientific) care for the tools of comprehension and interpretation, denote a profoundly new mental approach, a humanism which is not self-indulgent, and that refuses to speak of man without knowing him in his most diverse, and contradictory, manifestations—those that reveal him. A humanism that does not settle for a certain cultural tradition, whose history is chewed over again and again to the point of making it unusable, but which, rather, is well aware that venturing out in space is possibly more important than venturing out in time, as time always and only means *our* time, the time we feel as completed and solid, behind us.

In this sense, it is by reverting once again to the teachings of Mauss that Lévi-Strauss is able to write the manifesto for the new anthropology: a science that strives to make the Kantian project of the study of the laws of human thought, of that which makes man man—symbolic activity—scientific. But,

the ethnologist, unlike the philosopher, does not feel obliged to take the conditions in which his own thought operates, or the science peculiar to his society and his period, as a fundamental subject of reflection in order to extend these local findings into a form of understanding, the universality of which can never be more than hypothetical and potential. Although concerned with the same problems, he adopts an opposite approach in two respects. Instead of assuming a universal form of human understanding, he prefers to study empirically collective forms of understanding, whose properties have been solidified, as it were, and are revealed to him in countless concrete representational systems (Lévi-Strauss 1986: 10–11).

The ethnologist thus chooses the most divergent symbolic systems “in the hope that the methodological rules he will have to evolve in order to translate these systems in terms of his own system and vice versa, will reveal a pattern of basic and universal laws” (ibid.: 11). This approach, whereby all men are equal in the common problem of the essence of man, to which everyone makes a contribution; this humanism, of which ethnology—insofar as it is our code for gathering together these scattered contributions in a single reference system—is its main organ, exposes all the distance between the new and the old anthropology. When confronted with the savage world, Frazer spoke of a “tragic chronicle of human error and folly, of fruitless endeavours, wasted time, and blighted hopes” (1936: vi), while in his *Notebooks*, Lévy-Bruhl confessed how myths “no longer have any effect on us . . . strange narratives, not to say absurd and incomprehensible . . . it costs us an effort to take an interest in them.”¹ Behind these judgments there stood a concept of man identifiable with the concept produced by

1. In Lévi-Strauss (1966: 121). —Trans.

the West, or rather, with the man of the industrial revolution. The West's arrogance, the mask of its imperialism, is in fact a recent phenomenon.

Until Rousseau, and later still, the savage world, the world of the "others," was still a term of reference for thinking of man; indeed, in the savage world, humanity's common essence revealed itself in its most simple guise, thus allowing empirical analysis. It is perhaps not by chance that Rousseau's "new science" is closely associated with ethnology: "when one wants to study men, one must look around oneself; but to study man, one must extend the range of one's vision. One must first observe the differences in order to discover the properties" (1966: 30–31). Humboldt (1920: 21) too was convinced that an objective knowledge of man required an analysis of the entirety of man's subjectivities: "the subjectivity of humanity as a whole becomes however in itself something objective."

Barely sixty years later, Baker, one of the very first ethnographers—whose accounts were central to the development of Lubbock's theories—declared, however, that "human nature viewed in its crude state as pictured amongst African savages is quite on a level with that of the brute, and not to be compared with the noble character of the dog" (Baker 1866: 227). Hegel said, "the transition from monologue to dialogue is the birth of man." With the rejection of "dialogue" so typical of classic anthropology, the exorcism of the specter of the savage, man was dead. He was dead, at least, as a man who poses himself as a problem. One sets oneself as a problem only by considering all men, and thus all the living manifestations of man.

All men interest us, as they are all actualizations of what we *can* be. With the Industrial Revolution, however, the "other" men are not men anymore; they are just objects, nature. Their scientific objectification corresponds to their economic objectification: a purely naturalistic anthropology emerges.

But the negation of the savage's humanity corresponded to the negation, within western civilization itself, of many of man's "provinces," and man was conceived as pure *Homo Oeconomicus*, as pure producer.²

As Roger Bastide (1964) has noted, the concept of praxis emerging from Marxism is still actually ethnocentric, as it limits itself to the praxis of the western man. Marxism, being concerned solely with the problem of alienation, disengages itself from many of man's components, "from dream, from sensibility and affection" (ibid.: 445); faced with these phenomena, Marx narrows down the concept of praxis of his youth and adopts a "reductionist" approach.

European culture ends up by reacting irrationally to this mutilation of man; the savage world, which has conserved intact a lost reality, is once again reduced to the status of "thing," distanced, mythicized. Savage thought is, for Freud and Jung, a revelation of the unconscious, for Piaget—following in Freud's footsteps—it is narcissistic regression, for Lévy-Bruhl it is "mystic participation" and "paralogism," and for Frobenius, Jensen, and Volhard it is "paideuma," the original intuition of the world, religious emotion.

It is in this context that Mauss works, with a clear humanistic conscience. His approach is closer to that of the Renaissance than to Descartes. For Descartes, it is sufficient to know oneself in order to know the whole of man. Rationalism shuts

2. It is interesting to note that Mauss explicitly affirms in *The gift*: "it is only our Western societies that quite recently turned man into an economic animal" (1969: 74).

itself off from *all* of humanity's experience, while the Renaissance, right from the start, related itself to configurations of civilization that were "other" in order to know and complete itself. The Classical world, the Hebraic world and the freshly discovered New Worlds weren't just myths: they were manifestations of a common humanity, and had to be investigated in order to solve one's own problems.

The Renaissance lives in a tension toward the other, the different to oneself; man who seeks completeness feels incomplete in the absence of all other existing men. Thus Montaigne (1743: 20), convinced as he is that "every man carries the entire form of human condition," anticipates the approach of Mauss and modern anthropology. Montaigne searches for a direct contact with those men that we call barbarians solely because "everyone gives the title of barbarity to everything that is not in use in his own country" (228), queries at length a man "that lived ten or twelve years in the New World, discovered in these latter days" (224), "a plain ignorant fellow, and therefore more likely to tell the truth" (227), and collects, as a true ethnologist, savages' songs, of which he declares: "now I have conversed enough with poetry to judge thus much: that not only there is nothing barbarous in this invention, but, moreover, that it is perfectly Anacreontic. To which [it may be added that] their language is soft, of a pleasing accent, and something bordering upon the Greek terminations" (228). He also defends cannibals, accusing Europeans of being far more barbaric than them, who only eat the bodies of the dead. He engages in a long dialogue with a savage arrived in France, interrogating him on common human feelings: honor, courage, pride, and recognizes him as a man.

Mauss, who has contributed, perhaps more than any other, to the launching of the new anthropology and, above all, given it its meaning (wherein scientificity becomes the attainment of a better humanity and man's reclamation of everything that is human), is closer to the humanism of the Renaissance, the deepest meaning of which we ourselves have lost.

Despite the limitations of its time, his oeuvre still at least preserves, intact and fresh, this reference to man in his totality. This approach is perfectly reflected on the methodological plane: the concept of *total social fact*, his most interesting contribution, is the angle from which the whole of his work needs to be read and discussed.

The total social fact has a tridimensional character: 1) sociological, 2) historical, 3) physio-psychological. It is able, in certain instances, to set in motion society and its institutions as a totality. These "total" facts exist at the social level, but can only be perceived in concrete data, in individuals:

The tangible fact is Rome or Athens, or the average Frenchman or the Melanesian of some island, and not prayer or law as such. Whereas formerly sociologists were obliged to analyse and abstract rather too much, they should now force themselves to reconstitute the whole. This is the way to reach incontestable facts. They will also find a way of satisfying psychologists who have a pronounced viewpoint, and particularly psycho-pathologists, since there is no doubt that the object of their study is concrete. They all observe, or at least ought to, minds as wholes and not minds divided into faculties. (Mauss 1969: 78)

The tridimensional character of the total social fact on the one hand, and the problem of the relationship between society and the individual on the other (with

its corollary problem of the relationship between collective and individual psychology), form the conceptual core of Mauss' project, which is developed in different dimensions through his essays.

It is thus necessary, and more helpful, to trace the development of the theoretical endeavor of Mauss in relation to the concrete analyses to which it is linked. Only this way—remaining loyal to his method—can we attempt to explain what a “total fact” is, and what its explicative value may be.

Compared with his more mature work, the essay “Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie”—first in the *Sociologie et anthropologie* collection, now translated in Italian with the title *Teoria generale della magia e altri saggi*,³ written in collaboration with Henri Hubert and published in 1902–3 in *Année sociologique*—is, in a way, part of prehistory. It is however one of Mauss' most beautiful and organic essays, and has something of a revolutionary character, with an approach radically contrasting to that of British anthropology, and in particular Frazer. The point of departure for Mauss lies in French sociology's critique of British sociology, which was to be summarized by Lévy-Bruhl (1985: 23) as follows:

collective representations are social phenomena, like the institutions for which they account; and if there is any one point which contemporary sociology has thoroughly established, it is that social phenomena have their own laws, and laws which the analysis of the individual *qua* individual could never reveal. Consequently, any attempt to “explain” collective representations solely by the functioning of mental operations observed in the individual (the association of ideas, the naïve application of the theory of causality, and so on), is foredoomed to failure.

As we know, this critique dates back to Durkheim's article *Représentations individuelles et représentations collectives* (1898).

Mauss, who was Durkheim's nephew and also his collaborator in *Le suicide* (1897) and “De quelques formes primitives de classification” (1901–2),⁴ always remained faithful to this approach, although integrating it with the advances that had been made in psychology and sociology.

This is why the essay on magic has a clearly sociological tone right from the outset: “magic should be used to refer to those things which society as a whole considers magical, and not those qualified as such by a single segment of society only” (Mauss 1972: 18). Magic cannot thus be explained, as Frazer did, as a deformation of individual psychological laws, and nor can it be affirmed that “its two great principles [homeopathy and contagion] turn out to be merely two different misapplications of the association of ideas” (Frazer 1980: 12).

What is fundamental, in the determination of magical representations, is their sociological character. What requires investigation are thus magic's *agents, acts, and representations*.

3. Translated in English as *A general theory of magic* (1972). —Trans.

4. We have included full references for these texts here as they were not included in the original publication. Durkheim, Émile. 1897. *Le suicide: Étude de sociologie*. Paris: Félix Alcan. Durkheim, Émile and Marcel Mauss. 1901–02. “De quelques formes primitives de classification.” *Année Sociologique* 6: 1–72. —Ed.

Mauss also criticizes some of Frazer's other postulations. Sympathetic principles are characteristic not only of magic, but also of religion. And, more generally, magic and religion cannot be clearly distinguished on the basis that the rites of magic are constraining and those of religion persuasive. Rather, religion and magic should be postulated as two opposite poles with a whole range of often difficult to distinguish phenomena appearing between them. Magic is *the pole of sorcery*, religion *the pole of sacrifice*.

From a sociological perspective (and thus, for Mauss, from a "total" perspective), magic is anti-religion: "a magical rite is *any rite which does not play a part in organised cults*—it is private, secret, mysterious and approaches the limit of a prohibited rite" (Mauss 1972: 24).⁵ Magic is thus defined on the basis of the conditions in which its rites are produced and the role they play in social life.

Mauss thus analyzes with extreme care the sociological elements he has identified in magic and the psychological consequences derived from them that can explain it.

Firstly, the most important thing to notice is the particular relationship between magician (or shaman) and social group. This topic, which mobilizes and raises the question of the complex relations between the physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions, will never cease to interest Mauss who, in 1909, again in collaboration with Hubert, was to write an essay on "L'origine des pouvoirs magiques dans les sociétés australiennes," and in 1926 a comment—published in *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*—on the physical effects that the community's ideas about death have on the single individual. The issue, however, remains open to this day and, despite de Martino's studies and the essays by Cannon and Lévi-Strauss (later collected in *Anthropologie structurale*), the problem has yet to be solved. We still know far too little about the complex relations between the physiological and the psychological, the individual and the group, to be able to provide a satisfactory explanation of those phenomena that are exploited by magic and yet exist, under different guises, also in our own society.

In this sense, Mauss was one of the first to highlight the abnormal nature of the magician and the shaman, in an attempt to match them more closely to our psychopath.

Exceptionally excitable or abnormal individuals constitute a social class that has magical properties "as a consequence of society's attitude towards them and their kind" (Mauss 1972: 28). From this angle, the issue implies a number of problems, and raises the question of the relationships between ethnology and psychology.

Firstly, if we consider society as a system of information, that is a system of symbols, what relationship does the psychopath's symbolism have with that of the group? Taking the issue even further, are psychopathological phenomena exclusively individual? Can the language used to speak of non-collective phenomena be used by the anthropologist for the explanation of collective facts? As Lévi-Strauss noted in his introduction to Mauss, Ruth Benedict was the first to discover how the phenomena dealt with by ethnologists and psychologists are expressible in psychopathological terms. But precisely because she did not have a clear knowledge of the problems we have just outlined here, she was not able to

5. This argument will be resumed by Durkheim in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912).

explain this paradox. In truth, the issue could only be solved if we knew something more about the nature of the symbolic function. This too is a field that still lies ahead for anthropology. We can nevertheless agree with Lévi-Strauss when he states that psychological phenomena must be subordinate to sociological ones: it was thus imprudent of Benedict to use psychiatric terminology to characterize social phenomena; if anything, the relationship should be the opposite way, between psychiatry and sociology. “It is natural for society to express itself symbolically in its customs and its institutions; normal modes of individual behaviour are, on the contrary, *never symbolic in themselves*: they are elements out of which a symbolic system, which can only be collective, builds itself. It is only abnormal modes of behaviour which, because desocialised and in some way left to their own devices, realise the illusion of an autonomous symbolism on the level of the individual” (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 12). On the other hand, the domain of the pathological is never confused with that of the individual, as disorders are classified in categories, and each society has its favorite categories of disorders: the actual psychopathological phenomena themselves are determined by society.

Here, a double set of problems arises, which Mauss, with the limited progress of his time in the psychological and social sciences (he still hadn't met Freud when he wrote *A general theory of magic*), could only glimpse from afar.

The first problem pertains to *the relationship that exists between our psychopath and the sorcerer*. Do they or do they not belong to the same order of phenomena?

To address this first problem, we will use the approach Lévi-Strauss adopts in his introduction to the essays of Mauss.

Firstly, as regards phenomena of shamanism, psychiatrists have ruled out that these can be considered *identical* to our psychopathological states, as this would be too simplistic. Furthermore, when not in a possessed state, sorcerers are normal.

The contradiction can be solved in two different ways:

- 1) Either “trance” behaviors have no connection with our psychopathological behaviours
- 2) Or, they are of the same kind, but in this case “it is their connection with psychopathological states that we need to consider as contingent and as resulting from a condition peculiar to the society in which we live” (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 15)

The latter solution leads to a further alternative:

- a.) Either the alleged mental illnesses must be considered as the effect of sociological factors on the behavior of individuals “whose history and personal constitution have partially dissociated them from the group” (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 16)
- b.) Or, a truly pathological state is indeed present in these patients, but one of physiological origin, which simply creates fertile ground for certain symbolic behaviors “for which a sociological interpretation would still be the only appropriate thing” (ibid.).

Let us now turn to the second problem: what relationships exist between society and the phenomena it classifies as pathological?

The problem is of interest for two reasons: on the one hand, in fact, it is only by approaching it in this way that we can hope to achieve an understanding of ecstatic, shamanistic, and magic phenomena. On the other, it addresses the actual meaning of the presence of psychopaths in our society, and also the possibility of curing them.

It is clear then that these considerations re-connect to points (a) and (b): they do not claim to answer them (only an aprioristic mentality could hope for this in the absence of empirical research), but only to delineate a possible direction for research.

We note first of all two things: 1) from the studies of Mauss (particularly the 1909 ones) it emerges that the shaman or the magician, despite being “normal” when not in a possessed state, is subject to a whole series of taboos and prescriptions which maintain him in a state of psychological tension, and separate him from the group, *intentionally* relegating him to a situation of abnormality.

Again: people considered “abnormal” (because unexplainable or socially unclassifiable), such as women during menstruation, children (a world in themselves), psychopaths, foreigners, etc., are particularly fertile ground for magical phenomena, under the psychological pressure of the group. 2) Each society categorizes mental disorders in variable classes. Each society, that is, seems to provoke—one could almost say create the possibility for—only certain disorders.

It thus seems that society, while on the one hand taking cognizance of abnormality, on the other generates it, almost as if it needed it and therefore “chooses” only certain kinds of abnormality. Mauss had already affirmed that “it is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields” (Mauss 1972: 40).

What, then, is the meaning of pathology and its cure? Is pathology definable unequivocally, or only in relation to a specific society?

We already know, from Malinowski’s studies in the Trobriands, that the latter alternative is more plausible. Malinowski (1949) has shown that one of the pathological models present in our society (the Oedipus complex) is absent in Trobriand society, whereas another is present (the matrilineal complex).

If, on the basis of these experimental grounds, we can make a generalization, it could perhaps be argued, hypothetically, that in every society there are:

- 1) models of normality
- 2) models of pathology

strictly complementary and dependent on the constant asymmetry between social structure (which tends to be synchronic) and individual demands (which tend to be diachronic).

An attempt to explain this reciprocal functionality, where society specializes in two groups, one immensely more vast, the other smaller (although maybe, as Lévi-Strauss has suggested, in a relationship with one another that remains, for each society, *stable*), can be based on documentary material provided by Lévi-Strauss in Chapter IX of *Anthropologie structurale*, and by Nadel (1946). A hypothesis on the relationship between the two groups can be derived from these essays.

Society responds to the individual’s demands with certain behavioral models that correspond to certain specific possibilities for fitting into the social organization. But, because of the asymmetry mentioned above, a number of

demands remain unsatisfiable in terms of “normal” models unless there is a profound restructuring of the social organization itself.

Society, however, needs to frame this residue socially. This presents it simultaneously with a problem of organization and a psychological problem that triggers a classification mechanism. Society classifies its centrifugal tendencies, *in the sense that it makes possible only certain so-called “pathological” behaviors in order to demonstrate their eccentric and peripheral position in relation to its social organization and depict them negatively.* This classification, on the other hand, is strictly complementary to the psychological problem that the pathological elements themselves pose to the group, and to the “abnormal” tendencies that are repressed in “normal” individuals. Probably, a satisfactory explanation for this contradictory yet functional relationship can be attained only by ordering all the social system’s elements within a single informational model. Only then perhaps can we understand exactly the instinctive mechanism which, on the one hand, has to deal with the problem of socially framing centrifugal forces that it cannot satisfy, and, on the other, producing these forces according to certain models, in order to placate a potential dissatisfaction (and thus a potential centrifugal force) in its normal elements. A society, in fact, is a system that has to reckon with individuals, who are never entirely reducible to the terms of the model it maps out. If what we are saying is true—that society is unable to include within normal behavioral models certain “demands,” and thus certain characteristics, of the individual, and can only offer pathological models of stabilization and “normalcy”—then the complementary relationship between normal and pathological could be expressed as follows. On the one hand, society gives a “peripheral” status to anything not falling within its “central” code, while on the other it makes use of its peripheral elements to vent, through specific “rituals,” the potentially pathological and centrifugal traits of normal individuals, deriving from the incomplete overlap between social models of behavior and individual “demands.” The shaman thus is used to discharge all the group’s anguish and aggression, to objectify and project elsewhere the aggression, the psychic material removed from the group, by means of the scene he acts out. In this sense, as Lévi-Strauss has brought to light, the shaman has a function that can be compared to that of our psychoanalyst.

What the group also asks of the shaman (or of the psychopath in general) is a unilateral exacerbation of his psychic energies, of his abilities, in a direction that remains extraneous to the group. This explains why the shaman or the magician has tangible “abilities”—and possibilities—for emotional and intellectual experiences that the group uses to rebalance itself.

In this sense, the magician’s tricks and prestidigitation are functional behaviors, as they satisfy the group’s needs.

An experimental confirmation of this hypothesis can be found in Nadel’s study, where he ascertains that societies with shamans—unlike those without shamans—have not recorded an increase in mental illness because of the influence of their contact with our civilization, which is generally a traumatizing event for any group of “primitives.”

One could even ask if society needs a class of “abnormals.” Because it is through “abnormality” that experiences extraneous to the “normal” person are possible, experiences that he needs for reassurance, for overcoming what de Martino so effectively termed a “crisis of presence,” by actually exceeding his

“normal” condition, which, in movements of anguish, is felt to be profoundly unsatisfactory. This would explain the compensatory and calming role played by abnormality, and the “exceptional” behavior of certain individuals with regard to the “normality” of the group. A number of equivalents to this relationship can be found in our society: the dictator, the actor, the singer—don’t they all produce phenomena extremely close to those observed in magic or shamanic rituals? Notorious criminals like Jack the Ripper are needed by our calm bourgeoisie for venting its sadistic and aggressive instincts.

The mentally ill themselves have an important function. Although in a marginal position, with regard to the system, they are integrated in it. As Lévi-Strauss (1987: 18) observes: “the group seeks and even requires of those individuals that they figuratively represent certain forms of compromise which are not realizable on the collective plain; that they simulate imaginary transitions, embody incompatible syntheses.”⁶ The magician, says Mauss (1972: 96), “is a kind of official, vested by society with authority, and it is incumbent upon the society to believe in him.”

Mauss’ value, regarding the question we have tried to clarify, is that he was the first to shed light on the terms of the problem. His essay is a turning point because it addresses the relationship between psychological and social phenomena and the relationship between collective and individual behavior. The clarification of the problem, however, has no corresponding satisfactory solution, which, after all, Mauss still didn’t have the tools to provide. The qualitative jump to be made was from the portrayals of magical phenomena in some societies to the level where an explanation can be found for these portrayals that unifies them. Mauss wasn’t able to make this step. But, here too, he made an important breakthrough by removing magic from the domain of the arbitrary.

Magic is the manifestation of the classifying and ordering faculty of human thought. Going back to the themes of the well-known essay *De quelques formes primitives de classification* ([1902] 1963), Mauss argues that sympathetic relations group things and their properties by similarity and opposition: “in this way, the system of sympathetic and antipathetic magic can be reduced to one of classifying collective representations. Things affect each other only because they belong to the same class or are opposed in the same genus” (Mauss 1972: 78). “Magic becomes possible only because we are dealing with classified species. Species and classifications are themselves collective phenomena. And it is this which reveals both their arbitrary character and the reason why they are limited to such a small number of selected objects” (78–79).

But what mental operation lies at the heart of magic?

Mauss realizes that it is not possible to explain it from an intellectualist perspective, as British anthropology had done. “From the point of view of an individual’s intellectualist psychology” (181), magic would simply be an absurdity: “let us see whether a non-intellectualist psychology of man as a community may not admit and explain the existence of this idea” (ibid.). Mauss thus wants to avoid the danger of interpreting categories that are alien to us with our own. But does the

6. One just needs to think of the ways in which some societies—particularly in moments of crisis—have idealized illness as a privileged and eccentric state of being with respect to a system increasingly felt as profoundly unsatisfactory for individual needs. Cf., for example, some of Thomas Mann’s reflections in *The magic mountain*.

method he chooses allow him to achieve the goal he had set himself? The procedure with which Mauss obtains the “single principle” of magic is a good example of his “method of residues,” which Lévi-Strauss sets against Durkheim’s method of concomitant variation.⁷ Mauss explains his method as follows: “the various explanations which can be brought forward as motives for beliefs in magical acts leave a residue, which we must now try to describe. . . . It will be here that we shall find the real basis of these beliefs” (Mauss 1972: 106). In truth, this method of residues is simply masking a process of induction: as such, it does not question our interpretive categories, as was postulated, and ends up explaining the problem on the basis of them. The single principle of magical facts cannot be obtained with the normal inductive process we use for our own cultural facts.

And this is because the categories of the European observer of European social facts belong to the same order as the objects being studied, while the same cannot be said of the anthropologist, who constantly has to exercise “anthropological doubt”:

This “anthropological doubt” does not only consist of knowing that one knows nothing, but of resolutely exposing that which one thought one knew, and indeed one’s very ignorance, to the insults and contradictions which are directed at one’s most cherished ideas and habits by those who can contradict them to the highest degree. Contrary to appearances, I think it is by its more strictly philosophic method that ethnology is distinguished from sociology. (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 120–21)

The purely sociological induction procedure, in fact, applies categories that are commensurable to the social facts, because sociologists are subjects that belong to the social and cultural world they measure. In the induction procedure for cultural facts that are radically different to those the observer (the subject of the research) belongs to, a kind of mental revolution is necessary in order to create some elements of communication between my own subject and the subjects that have produced the fact I am studying. What are necessary are intermediary categories that allow the transition from our cultural and classificatory system to theirs. It is this typically philosophical operation of subjecting the actual categories of our research—the very ways in which we ourselves think—to criticism and analysis, that is vital to the anthropologist.

The final result cannot—we think—be the reaching of the very “essence” of the phenomenon studied, but the setting of the conditions for communicating with it.

In anthropology, it is a relationship between different subjects that is established, rather than a relationship between subject and object. In this sense, the result is characteristically philosophical; it is communication, dialogue, knowledge of a neutral ground where an encounter is possible, and thus the only possible form of comprehension.

Mauss, therefore, has not developed all the implied consequences of the revolutionary concept of the total social fact. As Lévi-Strauss (1987: 30–31) notes in his Introduction, “an appropriate understanding of a social fact requires that it be grasped *totally*, that is, from outside, like a thing; but like a thing which comprises within itself the subjective understanding (conscious or unconscious)

7. See “La sociologie française,” in *La sociologie au XX^e siècle*, Vol. 1 (1947: 542).

that we would have of it, if, being inexorably human, we were living the fact as indigenous people instead of observing it as ethnographers.” Internal learning needs thus to be transposed in terms of external learning. Accomplishing this task is possible because the social sciences reject any clear-cut distinction between the subjective and the objective:

[T]he subject itself—once the object-subject distinction is posited—can then be split and duplicated in the same way, and so on without end, without ever being reduced to nothing. Sociological observation, seemingly sentenced by the insurmountable antinomy that we isolated in the last paragraph, *extricates itself* by dint of the subject’s capacity for indefinite self-objectification, that is to say (without ever quite abolishing itself as subject) for projecting outside itself ever-diminishing fractions of itself. (ibid.: 31–32)

The importance of anthropology in its new humanism derives from the fact that “it offers this unlimited process of objectification of the subject, which is so difficult for the individual to effect; and offers it in a concrete, experimental form” (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 32). Different societies become the subject’s different objects: in no case, though, can the subject forget that these objects proceed from him and that analysis integrates them into subjectivity.

The qualitative jump Mauss was not able to accomplish was to reach the level of the unconscious, where the subjective and objective meet. The laws of unconscious activity reside in fact beyond subjective learning, but determine the modalities of this learning.

Mauss actually attributes a lot of importance to the subconscious. But does he draw all the consequences from the statement quoted above, that magic phenomena should be studied like linguistic phenomena?

Mauss is not alone in his awareness of the necessity to reform ethnology by bringing it closer to the methods used in linguistics (the first of the human sciences to make itself more scientific). Troubetzkoy, for example, according to his autobiographical notes, was already convinced just a few years later that “ethnology, history of religion, culture history, etc. could pass from the ‘alchemic’ stages of development to a higher stage only if, with regards to method, they would follow the example of linguistics” (Trubetzkoy 1971: 311). But adopting such a method implies studying cultural facts at the level where they become similar to linguistic facts, and thus at the level of the subconscious rules of speech.

Just as one speaks unconsciously following grammatical and syntactic rules, so one thinks and performs certain acts following categories that one is unaware of. Ethnological research requires us to move *beyond* the conscious interpretation an individual or group gives to the phenomena we are studying.

It is precisely this that Mauss did not do. The notion of magic that he applies (like that of the gift, later) is taken from a Melanesian interpretation of magic’s potential. Mauss (1972: 108) says

the idea is that found in Melanesia under the name of *mana*. Nowhere else is it so clearly evident. . . . *Mana* is not simply a force, a being, it is also an action, a quality, a state. In other terms the word is a noun, an adjective and a verb. . . . On the whole, the word covers a host of ideas which we would designate by phrases such as a sorcerer’s power, the

magical quality of an object, a magical object, to be magical, to possess magical powers, to be under a spell, to act magically.

This, thanks to the method of residues, is where the analysis arrives at.

In actual fact, in identifying the notion of *mana*, Mauss was only able to discover the semantic value it has for the savage. Thus he always remains in the realm of the savage's own description of magic—an ambiguous description, because the essence of magic escapes him, as it does us. The issue is not to know *what* the savage designates with the word *mana*, but the *nature* of those ambiguous phenomena that he designates with the ambiguous word *mana*.

An analysis of the concept of *mana*, therefore, can only be an analysis of the degree of the savage's understanding of these phenomena, and not an analysis of what is being designated with such a term. Lévi-Strauss (1987: 53) suggests that *mana* might be “a function of a certain way that the mind situates itself in the presence of things,” which must therefore make an appearance “whenever that mental situation is given.” *Mana* is one of those indeterminate terms like *truc*, *coso*, whose function is to fill in the gap between signifier and signified.

Words such as *orenda* and *mana* are used to designate phenomena that are not strictly magic, but that become *magical* to our eyes precisely by virtue of the extremely generic sign attributed to them. It is precisely this semantic vagueness, this indistinctness, that makes us call these designations magical designations. With this word, the savage designates facts whose precise meaning escapes him, but which he feels immersed in and which he uses (e.g., parapsychological and psychosomatic phenomena, which science, however, isolates).

Magic's substantial ambiguity, seen from the perspective of the indigenous interpretation and subsumed under “objective interpretation” of the phenomenon is, on the other hand, repeatedly acknowledged by Mauss. Regarding this, however, two questions can be asked:

- 1) Whether the term “magic” subsumes phenomena that are only provisionally declarable as similar to one another, and, if so, whether the analysis of magic actually refers to that level that Mauss doesn't reach but which is the only one common to all these phenomena;
- 2) Whether this level resides precisely in that *confusion of images* that he recognizes as being typical of magic, but that he does not examine in depth.

What we need to consider, however, is whether this “confusion” has its own laws, and what its actual meaning may be. If we do no more than talk of “confusion,” we remain as outsiders and merely state our ignorance, with the properties we attribute to the object being the opposite to the thought we are judging it by.

Magic, on the other hand, like art and myth, is a specific symbolic process, and its scientific investigation is still at a very early stage. There is probably a relationship between the three forms, residing precisely in the trait we have termed “confusion of images”: *in these symbolic processes, there is no empirical corroboration and language is used in an “overabundance of meaning” that it has with regard to the object, and nothing is done to put it in a rigorous relationship with the object that has been preliminarily established by a method of investigation.*

The condition for the construction of an order, in myth as in art as in magic, resides in the use of laws that allow for the possibility of constructing an entirely

linguistic order. This condition is to be found first and foremost in the very imprecision of language, in the possibility of making it work without a direct confrontation with experience. Is it not the case that what is present in magic under the guise of *technique* is present in all dimensions of this symbolic level? Language is posed as a creator in relation to the world, not as something that requires verification. Language is *always true*, as long as it acquires a *form*. In magic and myth this form is more strictly traditional, as it is very much in art. The fact that in art language is more flexible, does not make art less “traditional,” in the sense that the words, the semantic “pieces” through which it operates, are never artificial, conventionally postulated by the artist: the Saussurean “arbitrariness of the sign” does not exist in art. These semantic “pieces” can be used poetically only because they already contain “resonances” of deep meaning in the language they inhabit: “love” and “heart,” as Umberto Saba said, is in fact the most difficult of rhymes,⁸ to which all poets dedicate themselves. Do these words take on poetic value because they are in a context that awakens their immanent poetic quality? Why are poetry, myth, magic, at different levels and each in its own field, dominated in such impressive ways by the same themes? But even if we wanted to limit ourselves to the observation that words have resonances of meaning and a semantic value (which the artist finds already formed, and upon which he works), circumscribed to a certain historical domain, does the reasoning not remain nevertheless valid?

In any case, Mauss’s theory of *mana* is an interesting chapter in the history of epistemology: it exhibits the importance of words in knowledge. When cultural phenomena, so to speak, are of the same order of the language used to discuss them, the weight of the words is much less perceptible. But in the case of anthropology, the issue becomes macroscopic. The hermeneutic use of certain categories such as *mana*, *orenda*, *potlatch*, or totem, has played nasty tricks on anthropologists.

Words like these indicate a relation between objects and subjects. For example, the word totem, in a given society, corresponds to the human-animal or human-plant relation. But while the objects in the relation remain the same in different societies, the word, and hence the relation, changes. The word, then, is the real distinctive and discriminating criterion, as it is inserted in a system of relations that gives it its meaning, a system it indirectly reflects. The human-animal relation can have very different meanings, and cannot be reduced to the interpretation of any one society. For the ethnologist looking from the outside, the criterion will be that of reconnecting all the relations he knows *objectively to a certain subjective interpretation of that relationship*, an interpretation which, in truth, should be in the class of the objects only, as it is only the interpretation of one studied group. Only *subjective interpretations* can be compared to each other: otherwise, phenomena belonging to different classes would be compared as if they belonged to the same class. The ethnologist’s task can thus only be that of comparing all the subjective perspectives, all the *languages* with which certain facts are discussed: *to know them, it will not be possible to reduce them to one of those being observed as an object, from the outside.*

8. The words love (*amore*) and heart (*cuore*) rhyme in Italian. The banal yet complex nature of the rhyme particularly struck the Italian poet Umberto Saba, as we read for example in his poem “Amai” (1946). —Trans.

The essential task will be to compare these to *our subjectivity*, to *our language*, digging deeply until the points of contact between us and them are found.

The misunderstanding we encountered in the notion of *mana* crops up again in “Essai sur le don” (*Année Sociologique* 1923–24). And despite this, the essay has remained beautiful, exciting. It is in this essay that, for the first time, the concept of *total social fact* is expressed with extreme clarity, and its hermeneutic value is proven. Another thing that makes the essay interesting is its novel approach, the discoveries it discloses (particularly about the primitive economy) have been made possible by direct ethnographic research. Mauss, in fact, draws mainly on Malinowski’s ground-breaking studies in the Trobriand, thus demonstrating the importance of research “in the field.”

The phenomenon that Mauss analyzes is this: in many societies: “contracts are fulfilled and exchanges are made by means of gifts. In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation” (Mauss 1969: 1). Within this class of phenomena, one single aspect is isolated: “prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested” (*ibid.*). The problem to be solved will thus be: “in primitive or archaic types of society what is the principle whereby the gift received has to be repaid?” (*ibid.*).

To solve this problem, Mauss accepts the use of a restricted comparative method, applied within limited areas, in order not to create confusion. Basically, he applies the method of Durkheim, who had criticized the false “exhaustiveness” of the British comparative method, working instead on “crucial facts” in order to arrive, through successive extensions, at a characterization of the social fact under investigation.

The structure of the *The gift* is thus determined by its method: firstly, the problem is posed; secondly, it is solved by taking as objects of investigation facts that are particularly significant in two delimited, but far apart, geographical areas (some areas of the Pacific and Australia; North America); thirdly, through successive extensions, the survival of gift-based exchange systems in ancient Roman Law, classic Indian law, Germanic law, Celtic law, and Chinese law are studied. Finally, Mauss draws some “conclusions of a moral nature”: if sociology is society becoming conscious of itself, it can do no other than end with conclusions such as these, as it says something about the orientation of human actions.

The essay’s structure gives a glimpse into the extraordinary richness of its content. With exceptional erudition and agility, Mauss presents numerous facts in an entirely new light, and unmasks the myth of primitives’ inability to conceptualize economic value (as sustained by Karl Bücher).

He also reaches a fundamental conclusion: barter is not—as Bücher believed—the primitive form of exchange and, on the other hand, sale on credit is not found in evolved societies only; indeed, it derives—necessarily—from the gift. “Barter arose from the system of gifts given and received on credit, simplified by drawing together the moments of time which had previously been distinct. Likewise purchase and sale—both direct sale and credit sale—and the loan, derive from the same source” (Mauss 1969: 35)

What is the explanation Mauss feels he can provide for the legal bond of the gift as a primitive form of exchange? Once again, he postulates an indigenous interpretation as an “objective” interpretation.

The interpretation is provided by the Maori: the *hau*. The *hau* is the spirit of the thing given as a gift, which has such a constraining power that it forces its restitution through another object.

“In Maori custom this bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is in fact a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself” (10).

Exchange has the role of maintaining unity between groups and implementing an actual division of labor. The best example of this is the Trobriand *Kula* studied “in the field” by Malinowski. This seems to be the culminating point of a whole system of prestations and counter-prestations: “the *kula* is the gathering point of many other institutions” (25).

Gift and exchange are the same thing in this system. In the context of social solidarity, in fact, an entirely free gift does not exist: exchange always requires reciprocity.

This specific kind of relationship guarantees foreign, interinsular trade, but also sheds light on the very essence of archaic society: what we have is one of those *total social facts* that activate the societal structure at all its levels. “The obligation is expressed in myth and imagery, symbolically and collectively; it takes the form of interest in the objects exchanged; the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them; the communion and alliance they establish are well-nigh indissoluble. The lasting influence of the objects exchanged is a direct expression of the manner in which sub-groups within segmentary societies of an archaic type are constantly embroiled within and feel themselves in debt to each other” (Mauss 1969: 31). “The circulation of goods follows that of men, women and children, of festival ritual, ceremonies and dances, jokes and injuries. Basically they are the same. If things are given and returned it is precisely because one gives and returns ‘respects’ and ‘courtesies’. But, in addition, in giving them, a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself—himself and his possessions—to others” (44–45).

The conclusion Mauss draws from the archaic system of exchange goes as follows: “the spirit of gift-exchange is characteristic of societies which have passed the phase of ‘total prestation’ (between clan and clan, family and family) but have not yet reached the stage of pure individual contract, the money market, sale proper, fixed price, and weighed and coined money” (45).

But the study of the gift leads to some considerations concerning the economic structure of our own society. Against the supposedly “natural economy” (which, in reality, as Mauss has demonstrated, is merely a myth unproven by history), against the rigidity and cruelty of our law, against the marked distinction between real and personal rights, Mauss argues that we need to return to a “group morality”: “we should return to the old and elemental” (67), to a system of total prestations. “A wise precept has run right through human evolution, and we would be as well to adopt it as a principle of action. We should come out of ourselves and regard the duty of giving as a liberty, for in it there is no risk” (69).

These “moral reflections” are not as utopian as they may seem.

Today, even revolutionary theories—as Fortini⁹ recently pointed out—seem to tend exclusively towards a “rationalization” of bourgeois society. The archaic concept of exchange as gift, though, is so much part of our axiological structure that, it seems to us, even the concept of alienation is permeated by it. The rejection of alienation signifies indeed an attempt to return to a model that sees exchange as a gift, and not as a transfer of goods. Alienation only ends when human labor is not “thing-ified,”¹⁰ reduced to pure instrument, but is considered an integral part of the man who is doing it. Giving one’s work means—exactly as for the savage—giving something of one’s self, giving a *hau* that evokes human solidarity, that demands a return that is equal to the gift; a kind of exchange, thus, that does not allow pure “thingification.”

In a certain sense, the exchange model exists prior to all the rest, and is the categorial form in which man thinks of himself socially. Wherever society comes into being, the category also comes into being: it is not possible to reconstruct its origin from a combination of scattered elements. Therefore, even Mauss’ attempt to explain the gift through his particular interpretation of a given group ends up betraying the *a priori* and irreducible nature of exchange. As Lévi-Strauss (1987: 58–59) observes: “exchange is not a complex edifice built on the obligations of giving, receiving and returning, with the help of some emotional-mystical cement. It is a synthesis immediately given to, and given by, symbolic thought, which, in exchange as in any other forms of communication, surmounts the contradiction inherent in it; that is the contradiction of perceiving things as elements of dialogue, in respect of self and others simultaneously, and destined by nature to pass from the one to the other. The fact that those things may be *the one’s* or *the other’s* represents a situation which is derivative from the initial relational aspect.”

But the conclusions of the “Essai sur le don” suggest a further consideration, particularly important at the methodological level.

The *total social fact* cannot be understood, for Mauss, other than in individual elements, in tangible social blocks. The total social fact, that is, exists socially, but it is through concrete experience that one is guaranteed to perceive it. “In society there are not merely ideas and rules, but also men and groups and their behaviors” (Mauss 1969: 78).

Here, it seems we can go further than Mauss and argue that what is consolidated in social relationships needs also to be rediscovered in the individual who lives in them, being one of their poles. Taking it even further, we could perhaps add that the relationships forming the total social fact have to be related, through systematized rules of transformation, to the individual investigating them. As Wiener and Lévi-Strauss have highlighted with regard to the social sciences, the observer is part and parcel of the object studied. “To call the social fact *total* is not merely to signify that *everything observed is part of the observation*, but also, and above all, that in a science in which the observer is of the same nature of his object of study, *the observer himself is part of his observation*” (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 29).

9. *Quaderni piacentini*. Italian trimestral journal (1962–1984) on culture and politics, with Franco Fortini as one of its main collaborators. —Trans.

10. In the Italian original: *cosizzato*.—Trans.

The observer, in fact, is not only in a theoretical relationship with his object: he is in a concrete relationship with it, as the conditions of observation make him part of the object itself.

Recently, Gurvitch, once again, set this interpretation against the fact that “Mauss was a partisan of collective conscience and experience”.¹¹ Gurvitch’s observation questions Mauss’ interpretation of “collective representations.” In actual fact, the assertion that it is necessary to find the total social fact at the individual, or concrete, level does not necessarily imply a complete abandonment of the differentiation between collective and individual psychology. Examining an individual as a specimen in whom the total social fact concretizes itself doesn’t mean examining individual, and not social, psychological phenomena. Certainly, though, Lévi-Strauss has provided an interpretation of Mauss which is, at the same time, one step ahead, this being justified however by the fact that the strict Durkheimian separation between collective and individual representations is not shared by Mauss without “nuances.”

The essay “Real and practical relationships between psychology and sociology” (published for the first time in the *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*, 1924),¹² part three of the collection *Sociologie et anthropologie*, clearly demonstrates this.

Here, Mauss states that certain discoveries in psychology (for example the notions of “mental vigor,” “psychosis,” “symbol,” “instinct”) are essential for understanding social facts, and that this convergence between psychology and sociology is made possible by the common “totalizing” approach to their object.

Addressing psychologists, Mauss makes this important observation: all these advances “derive from your consideration not of such and such a mental function, but rather of the mentality of the individual as a whole. You will see that those of the facts that we can submit to your reflections in exchange belong to the same order” (Mauss 1979: 18).

The marked separation between psychology and sociology is here overcome: the two sciences collaborate in their common objective of considering man in his totality. In this sense, it seems to us that Mauss is indeed on the track of Lévi-Strauss, despite Gurvitch’s claim to the contrary.

The essay’s conclusions confirm this. Although Mauss starts by stating that psychology is the study of individual consciousness, while sociology is the combined study of collective and community consciousness (and not, as McDougall thought, an extension of psychology), he ends by asserting that: “whether we study special facts or general facts, it is always the complete man that we are primarily dealing with, as I have already said. For example, rhythms and symbols bring into play not just the aesthetic or imaginative faculties of man but his whole body and his whole soul simultaneously. In society itself, when we study a special fact it is with the total psychophysiological complex that we are dealing” (ibid.: 27). The sociologist has to ask of the psychologist for “a theory of the

11. In Bastide (1965: 125).

12. Published in English as Part I of the volume *Sociology and psychology: Essays* (1979).
—Trans.

relations between the various compartments of the mentality and those between these compartments and the organism" (ibid.).

The assertion that "sociology is only a part of biology just like psychology" (ibid.: 5) will thus be justified. The current separation between sociology and psychology is destined to fade increasingly until the day comes when Mauss' hoped-for theory is formulated. Anthropology, intended as that body of research that tendentially and knowingly approaches this unification, "belongs to the human sciences, as its name adequately proclaims; but while it resigns itself to making its purgatory beside the social sciences, it surely does not despair of awakening among the natural sciences at the hour of the last judgment" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 118).

This tendency of Mauss to consider man's social being as integrated and realized in his physical being, becomes more accentuated over the years. Evidence of this can be found in the last three essays in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*: "The physical effect on the individual of the idea of death suggested by the collectivity" (1926); "A category of the human mind: The notion of person, the notion of self" (1938) and especially "Techniques of the body" (1934).¹³

These works also clarify why a thorough study of the total social fact implies the observation of concrete individuals. If the fact needs to be reconstructed in all its dimensions, bridging the gap between social and physiological facts, then it will be necessary to see how representations and social relationships condition man's corporeal being and how the latter, in turn, makes the former possible. But the corporeal being is an eminently concrete fact; it is the human body, which needs to be studied, and the explanatory model extracted from it can only be compared with an individual body, not with something collective consisting of a set of relationships.

This body's physiological processes, though, are inexplicable without those sign relations that connect them to others. Proof of this is given in the first essay: "Physical effect of the idea of death," which studies information gathered in Australia and New Zealand that corroborates the existence of a direct link between the physiological-psychological and the social.

Mauss analyzes the rapid death of individuals that are considered and declared as "dying subjects" by society, despite being physiologically healthy and sound. The individual "believes, for precise collective causes, that he is in a state close to death . . . [he] believes himself to be bewitched or at fault and dies for this reason" (Mauss 1979: 38).

The actual physiological explanation for these events was not given until much later, by Cannon. Once again, Mauss anticipated more recent discoveries by posing the problem in the correct way. In these phenomena—he declares—man's social nature immediately catches up with his biological nature. This is thus a particularly significant example of a total social fact and of how the phenomena it generates span from the pure individuality of the single body where physiological facts take place, to the collectivity that provokes them.

The essay on the notion of person also covers the whole spectrum, from the social to the "bodily": "it is clear . . . that there has never been a human being

13. Parts II, III, and IV respectively of *Sociology and psychology: Essays* (1979). —Trans.

without the sense not only of his body, but also of his simultaneously mental and physical individuality” (61).

Mauss reconstructs the evolution of this concept, from its most primitive forms to modern philosophy, explaining the relationship between mask and person, suggested immediately by the Latin term “persona.”

Also from this sociological study, moral conclusions can be drawn. The evolution of the concept of the person, which up to the nineteenth century was identified with rational and cognizant activities, is now reacquiring its more vast archaic meaning. Although until not so long ago the “person” as mask, the social being, had superseded natural man, de-naturalizing him completely, many present-day phenomena make us think that a slow reaction to this tendency may be taking place. In this sense, we are rediscovering a problem that is vaster than the person itself. How are we anchored to the world? Is our person only form, categorization, discursivity, and thought that shapes the world? Or is it itself produced by the world, by “nature”—not in the sense of a set of concepts that define what is natural, but in the sense of something that is the actual condition for conceptualization, but that also escapes it?

The last essay, on the techniques of the body, is something like a program for the new anthropology that Mauss dreamed of. The techniques of the body are “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies” (97). The human body is an immensely vast and unexplored ethnological field: it is “man’s first and most natural instrument”(104).

To orient research, Mauss thus proposes a classification of these “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions” (120).¹⁴

Sadly, this field has been left largely unexplored, despite Lévi-Strauss proposing the creation of “International Archives of Body Techniques,” “providing an inventory of all the possibilities of the human body and of the methods of apprenticeship and training employed to build up each technique” (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 8).

Experience teaches how useful is it for Europeans to study “savage” techniques, techniques made necessary by work conditions similar to those in which primitive man developed them.

It is with this revitalization of the “total” man—“total” at the level of the individual, from his conscious being to his physical being, “total” at the level of humanity, spanning the whole arc of space and time of civilization—that the oeuvre of Mauss closes and the new anthropology begins.

The ethnologist’s journey, as any other journey, ends with a return. The knowledge of a world different to ours corresponds to a better knowledge of ourselves, to the wish to be in a new relationship with the savage that is now more familiar to us, because he is part of us.

As Remo Cantoni (1963: 252) writes: “the problem of our times . . . is to explore without preconceptions the real breadth of man, the real breadth of history.”

Our very language brings us to classify the phenomena of non-western societies with the term “primitive,” evaluating them through the diachronic opposition of

14. Cf. Mauss, *Manuel d'ethnographie*, 1947.

“before” and “after,” in parallel with those moments of development of western civilization that for us constitute the necessary order of progress. This simply exposes how much our mental categories, our so called “historic” categories (where the magic word “history” becomes the panacea of the lazy), are tainted by ethnocentrism. They are not able to admit, synchronically, simultaneously to us, historical developments and forms of civilization radically different from ours. Our language is impotent (because our history and our experience is impotent) when faced with a so-called primitive civilization. The only place it has found, in our classificatory terms, has been the myth of the past and of the primeval that the West—with a secret and perennial dissatisfaction—has dragged with it through all its history: the golden age, the paradise lost, the Garden of Eden, the state of nature. Primeval moments that always presuppose two contradictory evaluations of our civilization: liberation from a primeval state of barbarism and wilderness, or decadence from a primeval state of goodness and perfection.

The only thing that Western civilization—closed in the magic bottle of its own apparent self-confidence and its firm belief in its “magnificent and progressive destiny”¹⁵—held on to in this myth of the primeval was a secret remorse, the possibility of a radical overturning of values, of total critique of the direction in which it moved. This myth was like a limit concept, from which the direction of our civilization’s progress could be observed and evaluated. And it is significant that it is precisely in these terms that Rousseau intended it.

But when “primitive” peoples, those civilizations different to ours, have presented themselves to us with a direct impact, the myth of the primitive has served only to chase them back into the confusion of the primeval and indistinct state, into the “tourbillon mystique,” so that we could relate to them not as terms of comparison or as possibilities for evaluating our own values, but as extraneous, necessarily overtaken by the West’s millenarian development. Behind this attitude lies a specific metaphysics of history, a secret anguish and a fear of comparison with others.

Marx and Engels also attempted to make “other” civilizations fall within the metaphysical limbo of *our* primitive, of *our* past, in the timid steps of the first day of Creation. But “other” civilizations are other men that are living here and now on this earth, with us: they are not “primitive societies,” they do not belong to our past, but to our present, and to the common future of humanity that is on the road of rediscovering itself in all its parts.

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15. Valeri is here evoking Giacomo Leopardi’s bitterly ironic critique of the Enlightenment’s scientific optimism and progressivism in his poem “La ginestra.” — Trans.

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Marcel Mauss et la nouvelle anthropologie

Résumé de la rédaction : « On ne peut pas simplement se référer à Mauss ; avec lui, il faut débattre. » Dans cet essai, Valerio Valeri engage précisément un dialogue critique avec l'œuvre de Mauss. Valeri caractérise Mauss comme ayant inauguré une « nouvelle anthropologie » qui rompt résolument avec celle de ses prédécesseurs. Il le fait en prenant sérieusement en compte toute la diversité des catégories humaines et formes de compréhension de soi, plutôt que par extension des concepts européens de l'humanité comme norme universelle supposée contre laquelle toutes les autres seraient mesurées. Valeri révèle une unité de méthode et de théorie à travers les essais de Mauss sur la magie, le don, la personne, le corps et la mort, une unité centrée autour du problème des relations entre la psychologie individuelle et collective. L'article de Valeri, rédigé en 1966 et inspiré en partie par des écrits de Lévi-Strauss, est une explication synthétique et toujours d'actualité de la longévité de l'œuvre de Mauss. Il se lit aussi comme une charte de la transition de Valeri, qui des études de philosophie s'est ouvert à la vocation l'anthropologique. Dans la tonalité humaniste de Mauss, Valeri préconise une anthropologie adéquate à la réalité que les « "autres" civilisations sont d'autres hommes qui vivent ici et maintenant sur cette terre, avec nous : ils ne sont pas des "sociétés primitives", ils n'appartiennent pas à notre passé mais à notre présent, et à l'avenir commun de l'humanité qui est sur la voie de se redécouvrir dans sa pluralité. »

Valerio VALERI (1944–1998) was an Italian anthropologist with an expertise in the societies and cultures of Polynesia and Southeast Asia. From 1971–73, he conducted ethnographic field research among the Huaulu of Seram, Eastern Indonesia, on topics of exchange, marriage, mythology, and magic. In 1976, he completed a second PhD in anthropology at the University of Paris, based on archival research concerning pre-contact Hawaiian religion and politics. That same year, he moved to the United States and began teaching in the Anthropology

Department of the University of Chicago where he remained as Professor of Anthropology until his death in 1998. He is the author of *Kingship and sacrifice: Ritual and society in Ancient Hawaii* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), *The forest of taboos: Morality, hunting and identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), and two posthumous volumes: *Uno spazio fra se e se: L'Antropologia come ricerca del soggetto (A space between oneself and oneself: Anthropology as a search for the subject)*, Donzelli, 1999, edited by Janet Hoskins and Martha Feldman) and *Fragments from forests and libraries* (Carolina Academic Press, 2001, edited by Janet Hoskins).