Although Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), a nephew of Emile Durkheim and his appointed intellectual heir, rightly counts as one of the most prominent figures in the history of French anthropology, his contribution as a writer extends beyond the limits of the discipline of anthropology. For instance, Mauss, who was a member of the socialist party in France, S.F.I.O (Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière), also wrote many texts of a political nature: on socialism and Bolshevism, on the cooperative movement, on war, on the nation and internationalism.¹ In this chapter, I will focus on Mauss’s understanding of the national question and on his theory of international relations. Of particular importance for my analysis is a long manuscript on which Mauss worked in the years 1919–1920, and which he hoped to revise into a book on the national question. For a variety of reasons, Mauss never completed his project. However, the twin themes of “nation” and “international relations” continued to preoccupy him, as his publications attest.² In fact, in the early nineteen thirties, he declared that he had an “almost complete manuscript” of a “great work on ‘The Nation’ (elements of modern politics)”, which provided the background for all his other publications on political matters.³ After Mauss’s death, selections from his manuscript on the nation appeared as

¹ A large selection from Mauss’s political writings can be found in Marcel Mauss, *Ecrits politiques*, edited by Marcel Fournier (Paris: Fayard, 1997). For a recent study on this aspect of Mauss’s thought, see Sylvain Dzimira, *Marcel Mauss, savant et politique* (Paris: La découverte, 2007).


articles in scholarly journals. However, about half of the existing material still remains unpublished.

On the one hand, Mauss’s reflection is an inquiry into the origins, development, and possible future of nations. This already suggests that he viewed the nation as a historical entity which undergoes transformation over time, as opposed to being natural and timeless. In fact, Mauss did conclude that nations are typically modern, and essentially political, phenomena. On the other hand, Mauss also had a clear political intent in drafting *La nation*. His aim was to discover sociological facts with which he could back up his arguments for popular sovereignty, peace, and internationalism. He ended up proposing a relatively complete sociological theory of international relations: this was original to begin with, since many among the scholars of his time, as we saw in Chapter 2, would have dismissed the very notion of an international society as an *contradictio in adjecto*.

Next to presenting Mauss’s reflection on the nation and on international phenomena, I will suggest that his internationalist convictions and commitments offer deeper insights into his entire corpus. Contrary to Mauss, we have no moral or scientific obligation to distinguish strictly, as he did, the scientific from the political aspects of his thought. I argue that some of Mauss’s best known anthropological writings, most notably his celebrated *Essay on the Gift* (1925), can be better understood if read against the background of Mauss’s reflection on the national. Moreover, the subtle shifts in his thinking, between 1920 and 1930, which many scholars have commented upon, may have had something to do with the

---


5 The whole manuscript can be found at the Fonds Marcel-Mauss of IMEC/Institut Mémoires de l’Edition Contemporaine (Caen, France) under the call numbers MAS 26.11 to MAS 26.14. In the present chapter, I will occasionally directly quote from the manuscript. In such cases I indicate the source by giving the corresponding IMEC call number. A description of the manuscript and a discussion of its content can be found in Marcel Fournier, “Mausset’lanation’, ou l’œuvre inachevée,” *Sociologie et sociétés* XXXVI, no. 2 (2004).