Chapter 5

The “Social” as Reciprocity

Marcel Mauss and the Idea of Nation

Dario Verderame

Introduction

The study of religious phenomena, the research into the historic origins of social thought and the identification of relations at the foundations of the social, represent the main themes of the reflections that Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) develops within the ambit of the Durkheimian school of thought. In keeping with this subject matter, Mauss, after the end of the First World War, construes an original idea of nation and relations within the framework of a wider interest in the study of social cohesion and forms of civilization.

The themes of nation, nationalism and State are part of the Maussian scientific production that has been little explored due to the a-systematic nature of his work in general (two of his most important political writings on the nation and on Bolshevism remained unfinished), and because Mauss wanted to keep his profile as a committed intellectual separate from that of a scholar of social studies.

This essay, examining some of the stages of Maussian thought, aims to demonstrate how he made an important contribution to overcoming a static concept of society, closed within the confines of the nation-state. In particular, two lines of thought will be followed.

With the first, the aim is to make explicit the foundational nature assumed in his thinking by comparing phenomena of the relations between societies with those attributable to a single society or to those human groups that, in his eyes, seem to be much more recent and still badly defined: in other words, nations. The sequence society-nation-civilization assumed as the point of arrival of the scholar’s theoretical output (Di Donato, 1998) or as a research hypothesis to appreciate the internal coherence of his thinking (Martelli, 1987), does not lend itself to interpretation as a much needed evolutive tendency, although, in particular in the unfinished work on “The Nation”, Mauss gives cause, at some stages, for such an interpretation.

With the second, the aim is to place the emphasis on the peculiar meaning with which Mauss inflects the concept of “nation”, distinguishing it from that of “nationalism” on the one hand and “State” on the other. This is an area of
reflection which has been widely turned to in the literature, placing Maussian production on the theme of nation alongside “an effort to renew socialist doctrine” (Fournier, 2004: 222); socialism – it must be clearly stated – from the perspective of Mauss, unlike that of Durkheim (1928), is, above all, a tendency inscribed in concrete facts and immanent to social reality rather than a collection of ideas (Birnbaum, 1972; Karsenti, 2010).

The works of Mauss which will be referred to are, above all, those that can be ascribed to the “second phase” of his thinking, or rather those written after the First World War. It is the most intense period of Mauss’ life, not only from the point of view of his scientific production. In the aftermath of the First World War he takes on the responsibility of continuing with the collective work of the École Sociologique which, as a direct or indirect consequence of the war, lost many of its exponents, including his fraternal friend Henri Hubert and, above all, its founder Émile Durkheim. It is a never-ending work, almost “religious,”2 stimulated also by the relationships that Mauss develops with exponents of various disciplines from psychology to philosophy in an attempt to heal the rifts that had their origins in the radicalization of interpretations given to the theoretical positions of his master Durkheim. This is also a period that sees Mauss become part of the most prestigious French academic institutions and, at the same time, write essays on current political issues in a fervent and passionate manner, always, however, keeping separate his figure as a scientist from that of a committed intellectual.

As far as the themes we deal with are concerned, what strikes us immediately is the temporal coincidence between “The Gift” (Mauss, 1925a) and his work on (the) nation which, according to H. Lévy-Bruhl, who was responsible for the posthumous publication of a fragment, Mauss worked on from 1920 for the entire decade and, nevertheless, did not manage to complete. Even if one refrains from claiming that there is a close consistency between these two works, their temporal overlapping begs verification of the tie existing between them, as will become clearer during the course of our work.3

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1 For all further information regarding Mauss life the best reference is the imposing biography of the author by the Canadian sociologist Marcel Fournier (Fournier, 1994). The latter as will be seen later is also responsible for the collection of Mauss’ political writings (Mauss, 1997).

2 See in particular his work *In memoriam. L’œuvre inédite de Durkheim et de ses collaborateurs* (Mauss, 1925b).

3 The close interdependence between Mauss’ scientific production, especially with reference to “The Gift”, and his “political writing” has been shown in several places in the literature. In particular, M. Fournier (1995) and the monograph of S. Dzimira (2007), with a preface by Fournier. On this subject see also the essay of L. Bresky (1997) and the work of J. Terrier (2011).