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Re-imagining Sociology

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MAFFESOLI, Michel. 2000. *L'Instant éternel. Le retour du tragique dans les sociétes postmodernes*. Paris: Ed. Denoel.

The tragedy of life arises from the nature of will, which incessantly forces individuals to accomplish successive goals, none of which can provide permanent satisfaction for the infinite activity of the force of life, or will. Will thus leads people to pain, the remedy of suffering and death, to an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.
(Paraphrased from Schopenhauer)

Universities, where epistemologic paradigms are set and stored, are reluctant to shake up the foundations of their own convictions. This is particularly evident in the social and anthropological sciences, which have long been separated from their subject, who has become a fossilized object of study. Social and anthropological studies that have fallen behind the natural sciences, studies that for the past 100 years have defined a new scientific spirit that establishes a different type of relationship from what is real. They work with a definition that is quite different from that which classical mechanics taught us, far removed from Cartesian reason and Comte's positivism in the development of modernity. (1) Relativity, subatomic levels, indeterminancy, no-localization, simultaneity: these are some of the revelations of quantum mechanics and particle physics that do not leave sociologists and anthropologists indifferent. Nor are they unimportant to Maffesoli, Jung, Bachelar or Durand, who embarked upon this epistemological journey along with Edgar Morin, Michel Cazenave (2) and Jean Jacques Wunenburger. (3)

Michel Maffesoli is the director is the Centre d'Etudes sur L'actuel et le Quotidien and is the head of the Comité de Recherche sur L'Imaginaire. For more than 20 years he has worked in these centers studying the transformation of modern society. In particular, he has considered the doubts surrounding today's society, which was severely wounded by events during WWII. Society changes, affecting all social phenomena and actions, including film, which after the war became progressively more opaque, turning dramatic narration into tragedy. It prepared the path for the new waves

of disturbing deathlike figures present on the screen. (4)

Once structuralist euphoria has passed (although it is still perversely enjoyed by some) and in the midst of post-Industrial society with its mass consumption, post-modern criticism appears to contrast with the absolute reign of reason by questioning the unchangeable truths and principles of modernity. In this line of critical theory there is Maffesoli, alongside figures as challenging as Baudrillard, Lyotard and Derrida. Nevertheless, as opposed to those "philosophers of suspect"—suspecting language in the case of Derrida, suspecting what is real in Baudrillard, suspecting thought in that of Leyotard—Maffesoli's criticism is based on the belief that images and the imaginary underlie all social relationships. A dynamic substrate, an untouchable substance that is constantly changing, pure power that is always being updated in the many faces of post-modern society: short-lived, theatrical moments that are not subject of the principle of causality nor aimed at any goal beyond the effervescence of their own existence.

There are many echoes in Maffesoli's work, echoes of Schopenhauer's will as the beginning of all representations, a breath of life that ensures social ties, echoes of Nietzsche's tragic view of life, (5) the heuristic idea on which discourse that is presented as a recapitulation of the several characterizations of post-modern society is based. This idea of tragedy is guided by the recovery of the myth of Dionysius, whose imaginary reappearance guides all social events and representations; an imaginary paradigm that lends sense to the return of enjoyment of life, short-lived pleasure and eternity of the moment present in the framework of reevaluationg destiny (death) in the face of the teleology of the future, a utopia or ideal world facing modern historicism.

The return of Dionysius, and with him the tragic sense of life, implies but does not explain the abandonment of grand projects and concepts, dead embodiments in their theoretical immobility, to recover everyday existence as the true principle of reality. The myriad of stories rise to face History. This is where we find Maffesoli with his sociological forerunners: Georges Simmel, (6) the German sociologist, who directed his attention toward the commonplace, fashion, appearances, baroque masks and theatricality. The adverturer (a nomad), the player, the portrait, the physionomy of decaying cities, are all newly assessed in Simmel's focus on form and borrowed by Maffesoli, in whom some of us dare to see organized centers of so-called 'modern' film. This terminology is perhaps confusing, (7) as the dramatic project of modernity, strongly rooted in linearity and in a cause-effect relationship has declined in these approaches (as opposed to approach) to film at a disjunction in time, attention for everyday things, a desire to find that tragic hero that takes as much from life before happily handing himself over to the inevitable, death. Deleuze insightfully spoke to us about crystalizations in time as opposed to moving chains. (8) Maffesoli, who had read Simmel, speaks of tragedy and the eternal instant, the instant that is there, yet timeless in its experiences. Tragedy that refers to Eastern mythology and in which savagery returns under the guise of festive extasis and figures in an orgy. Are we not reminded of Eastern influence, particularly of the Japanese Mizoguchi and Ozu, in the so-called 'modern' filmmakers? Co we not recall the revered fathers of 'modern' film, Renoir and Rossellini, going to feed their imaginations in the waters of the Ganges? Is reason

not broken by the seeming unawareness in film after WWII, especially in that produced by those who had fleed from Europe? Is it not a ethnologist-filmmaker like Jean Rouch, who with his small team, brings the commonplace up to the category of film at the beginning of the new filmmakers' explosion? (9)

There is another meeting that should be pointed up. After Simmel and together with other social and cultural philosophers (Spengler, Guyau, Weber), we come across the philosophy of the Greek Cornelius Castoriadis in Maffesoli. (10) The Greek sociologist participates, in the words of Gilbert Durand, in the so-called "reenchantment of the world" by locating social imagination at the base of all sociological phenomena; social imagination understood as the luck of collective unconsciousness, a shared symbolic store that assure the participatioon in everything and as a result ties to society. Here we see the influence of Carl Gustav Jung, one of the major figures in 20th century thought.

Following Castoriadis, Maffesoli's sociology is one of depths, (11) hermeneutic and a desire to be comprehensive in which the interpretation of phenomena replaces causal explanations. This interpretation becomes a compendium in the present work, which is more than a mere recapitulation of his thought.

We are witness to a series of phenomena that become coherent under the view of Dionysius and in the observation of the return of a tragic sense of life to provide shape to society. It is true that philosophers such as Jean Brun and Jean Marie Domenach (12) predicted this previously, but it is Maffesoli who provides the best interpretation for the tragic sensitivity of the eras and of time, under the watchful eye of the playful god, because time slows down when it is not stopped. In the face of a dynamic, linear, and fast-moving understanding of time, a cyclical, slow-moving sense imposes itself: mythical temporality challenges historical time.

This tragic sense becomes a return to tribalism, for better or for worse, as a principle for social identification; in it, being a nomad and exile are key phenomena; in the playful drunkenness and orgy as com-passion (community participation); in theatricality and ephemeral masks; in the return to savagery, to dreams, to *pueraeternus* as an ideal. Tragic sensitivity and Dionysian imagination that end up postulating an energetic tension between the archaic and progress, a collective will as opposed to the Enlightenment's disjunctive logic. This is the key: developing sensitive reason, reason that is not divorced from life's experiences or emotions. (13) Reason that, in the end, does not relegate the imaginary to the category of crazy but rather integrates it and recognizes it as the backdrop on which all social and cultural phenomena are based and as a result essential for the proper interpretation of representations, texts, and societies.

Maffesoli, together with Durand, (14) Cazenave, and Wunenburger, (15) among others, all explore the path of the science of the imaginary, which should and in fact must account for a society dominated by the bombardment and omnipresence of images.

It is also fair, however, to remember that the line of thinking represented by Maffesoli also raises doubts among the so-called neo-Enlightened. (16) There are accusations of inconsistency, neoconservatism and localism. Strong arguments the should concern us, although we refrain from handing the mystery of image and the poser of emotion over to the superficiality of concepts and the consistency of purely theoretical outlines.

Notes

(1) Bachelard, Gaston. 1934. *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*. Paris: P.U.F.

(2) Cazenave, Michel. 1996. *La science et l'âme du monde*. Paris: A. Michel.

(3) Wunenburger, Jean Jacques. 1990. *La raison contradictoire*. Paris: A.Michel.

(4) The classic idea of opacity as opposed to transparency is discussed in *El cine clásico de Hollywood* by D. Bordwell, J. Staiger and K. Thompson (Spanish translation published in Barcelona, Editorial Paidós). An interesting approach to the hermeneutic study of post-WWII film up to the "New Waves" can be found in *La Metáfora del espejo* by Jesús González Requena (Madrid, Hiperión publishers) and in *El tràsit entre el classicisme i la modernitat* by Núria Bou (*Formats* nº2, 1999).

(5) The revindication of Maffesoli coincides with P. Sloterdijk's important study, El pensador en escena: El materialismo de Nietzche (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2000). Although dead for a hundred years, Nietzche's tragic view is quite modern.

(6) Simmel, Georges. 1990. *Philosophie de la modernité*. (2 volumes). Payot.

(7) It is fair to say that other fields have proposed a different terminology; see, for example, 'post-classical' film as defined by Jesús González Requena and his school.

(8) Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. *La imagen movimiento. Estudios sobre cine 1*. Barcelona: Paidós; 1987. *La imagen tiempo. Estudios sobre cine 2*. Barcelona: Paidós.

(9) *Chronique d'un été* (1961) and *Les Maitres Fous* (1955) are two examples.

(10) A good, brief introduction to Castoriadis is found in C. Sánchez-Capdequí, *La Imaginación social. Aproximación teórica a la sociología de C. Castoriadis*, Suplementos Antropos, 42, Feb. 1994.

(11) For the definition of the so-called sociology of depths, please see Durand, Gilbert (1980*), L'âme tigrée*: *les pluriels de Psyché*. Denoël Gonthier and (1996) *Introduction à la mythodologie: mythes et societé*, Paris: Albin Michel.

(12) Brun, Jean. 1969. *Le retour de Dionysos*; Domenach, Jean Marie. 1967. *Le retour*

du tragique. Ed. du Seuil.

(13) Maffesoli, Michel. 1997. *Elogio de la razón sensible: una visión intuitiva del mundo contemporáneo*. Barcelona: Paidós.

(14) Durand, Gilbert. *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire. Introduction à l'archétypologie générale*. Paris: Bordas, 1970.

(15) Wunenburger, Jean Jacques. 1997. *Philosophie des images*. Paris: PUF.

(16) Mardones, José María. 1990. *El neo-conservadurismo de los posmodernos*. In: VVAA. *En torno a la posmodernidad.* Barcelona: Anthropos.

